

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Lesbian Love Stories in Young Adult Literature and Graphic Memoirs Narrative Constructions of Same-Sex Relationships Between Female Characters Across Genre and Form**

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**Lesbian Love Stories in Young Adult Literature and Graphic Memoirs:  
Narrative Constructions of Same-Sex Relationships Between Female Characters  
Across Genre and Form**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the narrative constructions of same-sex relationships between female characters in lesbian love stories published for a young adult audience in the United States in English from 1976 to 2016. The thesis argues that there has been a significant shift in the portrayals of lesbian and female bisexual characters, and their same-sex relationships, during this period, as well as a dramatic increase in the diversity of these stories for a young adult audience. The interrogation of narrative and characterisation takes into consideration the ways these lesbian love stories participate in and are shaped by genre, discussing generic conventions from romance, fantasy, science fiction, and memoir and, to a lesser extent, magical realism and historical fiction. The investigation also privileges the idea of love, in its multitude of forms, as the central theme of the selected novels, and for the research project as a whole.

Through the examination of the research corpus, the thesis, first, proposes three key narratives elements—*the revelation (coming out)*, *the first kiss*, and *the resolution*—that serve a particular function in the representations of these characters and their romantic relationships in YA novels and graphic memoirs. The analysis then includes case studies on the work of two prominent authors of lesbian and bisexual young adult novels, Julie Anne Peters and Malinda Lo, in respective chapters. The thesis will next explore philosophically motivated fiction on the theme of love. Finally, a study of graphic memoirs will consider genre in the portrayals of lesbian love stories in the comics form. Overall, the thesis illustrates a spectrum of storytelling—from the conventional romance narrative to novels that are deeply invested in the depiction of love, in all its forms—through the depictions of same-sex relationships between female characters for a young adult audience.

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## Introduction

### **Exploring Lesbian Love Stories for the Young Adult Reader**

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 1976, the United States of America (US) culminated a series of bicentennial celebrations. Fireworks displays were set off across the country, President Ford addressed the nation from Washington, D.C., and an international gathering of tall ships sailed up the Hudson River, bringing thousands of sailors into New York City for the festivities. In the final section of her graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006), cartoonist Alison Bechdel retrospectively adjusts the memory of her father—and herself—during the celebrations in Greenwich Village, the historic gay and lesbian neighbourhood of New York City, having not fully understood the magnitude of what she was witnessing at the time. She remarks that she was ‘moved by [her] own open-minded tolerance’ (*Fun Home* 190) as a fifteen year old and that the exposure to gay culture left her ‘supple and open to possibility’ even if she did not then ‘draw a conscious parallel to [her] own sexuality’ (191). That same year, with little fanfare, Viking published the young adult (YA) novel *Ruby* (1976) by Rosa Guy, the first novel in the US to feature a lesbian relationship for a young adult audience. *Ruby* is set in Harlem, New York City, and tells the story of eighteen-year-old protagonist Ruby Cathy who falls in love with classmate Daphne Duprey. Ruby is desperately lonely, both in her family and at school, until she finds ‘a likeness to herself, a response to her needs, her age, an answer to her loneliness’ (Guy 55) through her brief intimate relationship with Daphne.

Ruby’s emotional experience is conveyed through the depth and breadth of feelings expressed following her first kiss with Daphne at the beginning of their relationship. The third-person omniscient narrator offers the reader a multitude of metaphors for the experience of love through the description of Ruby’s internal state. The narration of the kiss starts with an expanded list of colours, designating the



qualities of each shade in highly romantic language: ‘Love was green. Dark green, light green—the new light green of a world bursting with life. Love was blue. A pinkish blue, light blue, bright blue—midnight blue pin-pointed by shimmering silver needles of light piercing the heart’ (56). The list of colours continues with additional metaphors for orange, grey, and red, before moving on to describe love as different shapes, as a feeling ‘fluid as the waves of a sea’ (56), as pride, and as the act of believing in someone new. The litany of romantic metaphors focuses the reader’s attention on the emotional aspect of the characters’ same-sex relationship. Even when the narrator references the physical or sexual dimension of Ruby and Daphne’s relationship—‘Holding, touching, fondling, body intertwined with body’ (57)—the reader cannot be sure if the subsequent imagery—‘racing around the world on rays of brilliant color [...] returning to tenderness, a gentle lapping tenderness’ (57)—is to be understood erotically or emotionally as the description so closely mirrors the amorous language on the previous page. This use of romantic language and the significance of the first kiss for female characters embarking on a same-sex relationship would, over the following decades, become a key narrative element in the portrayal of lesbian love stories in YA novels.

Ruby and Daphne’s relationship is a brief, passionate affair, but it concludes with both characters returning to heterosexuality. When Daphne declares that she is ‘going straight’ (216) and breaks up with Ruby, the protagonist attempts to commit suicide, is saved by her father, and then considers her neighbour, Orlando, as a potential boyfriend. Through these dramatic events, Guy’s YA novel tells a story about a lesbian relationship for a teenage readership; however, even considering the romantic language, *Ruby* is not a love story. First, the same-sex relationship is not the central focus of the narrative. Rather, Ruby’s affair with Daphne is one of many interpersonal relationships depicted in the novel. In particular, her relationships with her sister, Phyllisia, and her father, Calvin, are each given substantial narrative space. The main drive of the

narrative is Ruby's loneliness, not love: Phyllisia and Calvin are portrayed as the cause of her loneliness whilst Daphne, as a friend and then a lover, offers a temporary balm. Second, *Ruby* does not appear to be interested in telling a story *about* love either. The narrative is invested in portraying the emotional responses of the protagonist to her interpersonal relationships, which happen to include a first same-sex relationship, but it is not asking any questions about the nature of love or what it means to love and be loved. Furthermore, Ruby does not grow or change as a result of her relationship with Daphne. Ruby begins and ends in the same emotional and physical space with little acknowledgement of what has passed or personal reflection on what that means for her sense of identity. Ultimately, though, the depiction of a lesbian relationship in Guy's *Ruby* did demonstrate the *potential* to tell a lesbian love story in a YA novel. It raised questions of identity and sexuality, love and emotion, and same-sex love stories in novels for a young adult audience—questions that the following four decades would slowly answer. Published after the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the start of the Gay and Lesbian Rights movement in the 1970s, but before the crisis of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, *Ruby* opened the door for other characters to claim their lesbian (and bisexual) identities and forge lasting same-sex relationships in YA literature.

### **Lesbian Love Stories: Aims, Definitions, and Contexts**

This thesis will examine the narrative construction of same-sex relationships between female characters—what I term 'lesbian love stories'—in YA novels and graphic texts published from 1976 to 2016 in English in the US. I have chosen this starting point because it aligns with the emergence of lesbian representation in YA literature, but also because it begins a period in which the field of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) literature for a young adult readership has exponentially grown. I argue

that the resulting proliferation of LGBTQ YA novels, as well as the change in those narratives and characterisations is due, in part, to the incremental progressive shifts in the social and political attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships in the US during this period. For example, whereas the inclusion of a gay or lesbian character in a YA novel published in the final quarter of the twentieth century almost certainly ended in that character's death, heartbreak, or loneliness, the majority of more recent YA novels depict multi-faceted gay and lesbian characters, as well as bisexual and transgender characters, whose stories often resolve with a positive 'happy ending'. I aim to track and analyse these developments within the evolving socio-cultural US context by examining key texts, authors, and trends. This thesis is the first full-length critical study to specifically examine the literary representations of lesbian and female bisexual protagonists, and their same-sex romantic relationships, in novels and graphic texts published for a young adult audience in the twenty-first century.

Concurrently, I argue that there has been an increasingly varied use of genre and form by authors in the telling of lesbian love stories for a young adult audience since the early 2000s. I have thus designed the thesis as a series of case studies predominantly focused on examining the portrayal of lesbian love stories in relation to the genres, traditions, and forms in which they participate. My analysis will consider the following genres: popular romance, young adult romance, and lesbian romance, including the legacy of lesbian pulp fiction; fantasy and science fiction, separately and in relation to one another through their evident preoccupation with narrative worldbuilding; the concept of 'the adolescent novel of ideas' and its relationship with genre, with examples from realism, magic realism, and historical fiction; and, finally, the comics form, with particular attention paid to the graphic memoir. This chapter structure is intended to illustrate a spectrum of storytelling—from the conventional romance narrative to novels that are deeply invested in the depiction of love, in all its forms—through the depictions

of same-sex relationships between female characters for a young adult audience. I aim to contribute original scholarship to the fields of LGBTQ YA literature, romance studies, genre studies, graphic texts, and children's literature more generally, as my research brings necessary critical attention to the narrative construction of lesbian and female bisexual protagonists and their same-sex romantic relationships.

To achieve these aims, my analysis has been underpinned by a series of research questions. First, I am interested in how the lesbian love story, as written and published for a young adult audience, has evolved in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As I will explore in the following section of the Introduction and in subsequent chapters, the publication of YA novels with lesbian and bisexual characters has been influenced by the historical contexts of their production as well as the YA narratives that have proceeded their publication. Second, I have considered how lesbian love stories are constructed in YA novels, particularly in terms of narrative structure, character, and genre, as well as sought to expose the gaps and overlaps between these narratives with other genres of romance, such as popular romance, young adult romance, and lesbian romance. As I will discuss in Chapter One, the majority of the YA novels in my research corpus are, what I term, lesbian YA romance novels (see Appendix 1 Lesbian Young Adult Romance Novels) and, as such, they share key narrative elements and conventions that reproduce aspects of, or depart from, their generic cousins. Third, I have questioned what ideologies underpin the portrayals of lesbian and bisexual protagonists and their romantic relationships in these YA novels and graphic texts. This research is concerned with what is communicated to the implied reader—who is, for the most part, an implied young adult reader—through the implied authors' intentions in depicting various genders, sexualities, and same-sex romantic relationships. The authors examined in this thesis often make it evident, both through their fictional narratives and in their public engagement with readers, that they are politically invested in increasing

the representations of marginalised identities for a young adult audience. Finally, at the heart of this research project has been the question of how love and desire operate in lesbian love stories for the young adult reader. This has raised concerns regarding how love impacts understandings of sexual identity, how love and desire are expressed physically and emotionally, and how love shapes narrative structure. Additionally, I have considered how multiple forms of love, beyond those associated with romantic love, function in the narratives and what those depictions communicate to the reader.

Thus far, I have used the term ‘lesbian love story’ without qualification, but I now want to clarify why I have chosen this term, how it has impacted the compilation of my research corpus, and how it will be employed throughout the thesis. This research is fundamentally invested in interrogating the ways in which romantic love between female characters is constructed in narratives written for a young adult audience. As such, I have built my research corpus to incorporate portrayals of same-sex relationships across a variety of genres and forms because my analysis questions what constitutes a love story and how these love stories are shaped by their participation in genre. I have thus conceptualised the ‘lesbian love story’ as distinct from a ‘lesbian romance’, which I will fully explore in Chapter One, and from the general category of any narratives with lesbian or female bisexual protagonists or secondary characters, such as *Gravity* (2008) by Leanne Lieberman, *Not Otherwise Specified* (2015) by Hannah Moskowitz, *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016) by Gabby Rivera, and *Girl Mans Up* (2016) by M.E. Girard, which could be thought of as ‘lesbian novels’ or ‘bisexual novels’, in order to retain the focus on love without confining those discussions solely to the romance genre. To clarify how I use the term ‘lesbian love story’ in the thesis, I will breakdown the phrase into three parts: lesbian, love story, and love. Each of these concepts has a respective history and will mean different things in various disciplines and areas of study. It is my intention to explore the gaps and overlaps in these meanings and practices as a way of

opening up the examination of the narrative construction of same-sex romantic relationships between female characters in YA literature and graphic texts.

Jodie Medd writes that there is the ‘preoccupying problem’ of defining and identifying what we mean by ‘lesbian’ as the word is ‘a sign that fails to signify in a satisfying way’ (1). Medd argues that this failure is because ‘any attempt to define lesbian in reference to love, desire, passion, eroticism, and/or sexual activity between women immediately provokes questions about how such intimacies and pleasures are understood, nuanced, and shaped within culturally and historically specific gendered and sexual systems’ (1-2). I am particularly interested in some of these questions, which include but are not limited to: what is meant by the categories of sex and gender; what it means to claim a sexual identity; and how intimate relationships are constructed and labelled. Considering this contested academic territory, I do not want to be ‘confining or regulatory’ (1) in my explanation, and yet I want to indicate how ‘lesbian’ has been employed and understood in relation to the characters and relationships in YA novels discussed in this thesis. When the protagonist or love interest is identified as a lesbian, either by a character, the narrator, or through peritextual elements, I use the term in my discussion of their characterisation. Characters that are identified as lesbians are generally portrayed as understanding the word to mean a female person who is romantically or sexually attracted to another female person. The majority of the characters in the YA novels in my research corpus are identified through the use of the term lesbian within the text; however, some characters prefer the term ‘gay’, such as Astrid in *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King, or do not label themselves at all, such as Ash and Kaisa in *Ash* (2009) by Malinda Lo. There are some YA novels with female characters who identify as bisexual, such as Reese in Lo’s *Adaptation* (2012) and Sophie in Tess Sharpe’s *Far From You* (2014), and they are portrayed as understanding themselves to be a female person who is romantically and sexually

attracted to both female and male persons. For the analysis of each text, I use the identity category—lesbian or bisexual—given to the character in the text; when no label is provided I withhold choosing a sexual identity and defer to discussing the character in relation to her romantic same-sex relationship. By honouring the sexual identity of the characters as stated in the text, I wish to make space for the continued relevance of identity politics as a political strategy. Twenty years ago, Sally Munt declared that to ‘live as a lesbian [...] is still an heroic act’ (2), a sentiment that remains true today.

Somewhat contradictorily and yet predictably, my use of the word ‘lesbian’ changes when it functions as an adjective in relation to a narrative relationship versus a love story. For the former, I tend to avoid labelling the narrative relationships as ‘lesbian’ in favour of referring to them as ‘same-sex relationships’. As all of the characters in the YA novels of my research corpus are identified as female, I interchangeably refer to the characters as female or girls and (young) women in my examinations of the texts, and thus extrapolate that the characters’ relationships are comprised of two people of the same sex. This declaration is based on the premise that if none of the YA novels announce that the characters identify as transgender, non-binary, or otherwise gender non-conforming then the characters are cisgender female, meaning that they are characters who are constructed as having a sense of gender identity that aligns with their sex designated at birth. By predominantly referring to the relationships as ‘same-sex’ rather than ‘lesbian’, I aim to avoid contributing to the erasure of bisexual or non-identified characters in the YA novels, as the identity-specific descriptor could be read as implying that both characters are lesbians. However, I also acknowledge that the use of ‘lesbian’ as an adjective to indicate a romantic or sexual relationship between two women *is* useful shorthand. The word, whether we want it to or not, offers an immediate understanding of and searchable key word for the romantic relationships to be discussed within this selection of YA novels. (Online

communities of readers sometimes adopt the descriptor 'F/F' for 'female/female' to avoid this very issue, but it is not (yet) an acronym commonly used in academic inquiry.) While Judith Butler would 'like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign [of lesbian] signifies' (14) there is no doubt that 'lesbian' remains the clearest adjective to describe a same-sex romantic or sexual relationship between two women. For these latter reasons, I have chosen to use the term for my overall examination of the love stories found within these YA novels and graphic texts. In general then, I will refer to specific relationships in the texts as 'same-sex', but refer to narratives about same-sex relationships between female characters as 'lesbian' love stories throughout the thesis.

What is meant by a 'love story' is another topic of debate, albeit one based on literary histories rather than identity politics. Author Jeffery Eugenides posits that '[when] it comes to love, there are a million theories to explain it. But when it comes to love stories, things are simpler' (xiii). Eugenides argues that '[the] happy marriage, the requited love, the desire that never dims—these are lucky eventualities but they aren't love stories' because, for him, a love story depends 'on disappointment, on unequal births and feuding families, on matrimonial boredom and at least one cold heart' (xiii). He emphatically prioritises the drama of the love story whilst dismissing events that the main characters of those narratives seek to attain. And yet, those 'lucky eventualities' are the very events that define some love stories. As I will discuss in Chapter One, passionate declarations, engagements, and marriages are not happenstance occurrences, but essential elements of a romance narrative that romance readers, for example, believe to be a love story. The fallacy of Eugenides' statement, though, is not in his deprioritising of these blissful resolutions, but in believing that love stories are more simple than love. Surely, if love is so complex as to require 'a million theories to explain it', then the millions of stories about love have the potential to be just as



complicated. As one of the fundamental aims of this thesis is to disrupt what is meant by the concept of a ‘love story’, I will ask some of the following questions: Is a narrative about two women in a romantic relationship a love story? What if the central romantic couple does not have a ‘happy ending’? Can a love story be about different types of love other than romantic love? Does a personal recollection of a romantic relationship count as a love story? The ‘simple’ answer to these questions is: Yes. The broader picture, though, is more complicated.

The question of what love *is*, note psychologists Robert J. Sternberg and Michael L. Barnes, has been addressed ‘by poets, novelists, philosophers, theologians, and, of course, psychologists, among others’ because many people believe ‘love is the most important thing in their lives’ (3). Fellow psychologist Zick Rubin contends that one of the main issues facing those researching love is that, despite its near-universal importance, “‘love’ means different things to different people’ (viii). In their biomedical research on the subject, Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon focus on ‘the shaping power of parental devotion, the biological reality of romance, [and] the healing force of communal connection’ because love ‘makes us who we are, and who we can become’ (viii). Author and theologian C.S. Lewis explored the concept of love in relation to Christian thought and philosophy, arguing for four categories of love. These were based on different types of words for love that represented the familial, friendly, erotic, and unconditional in Ancient Greece. John Alan Lee subsequently proposed five ‘love-styles’, which were also based in Greek etymology. Clyde Hendrick and Susan C. Hendrick later updated Lee’s work, but reasoned that there were six ‘styles’ of (romantic) love. For this thesis, I have used the work of Roman Krznaric who also argues for six categories that adjust and expand the categories of his predecessors. These are: *eros* (erotic love), *philia* (friendly or familial love), *ludus* (playful love), *pragma* (committed love), *agape* (unconditional love), and

*philautia* (self love). Krznaric's categories have incorporated three of Lewis's categories (*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*) and four proposed by Hendrick and Hendrick (*eros*, *ludus*, *pragma*, and *agape*; they added *pragma* to Lee's model). Krznaric also combines the meanings of *philia* and *storge* (Lewis, 1963; Lee, 1973; Hendrick and Hendrick, 2006) into one category, and adds *philautia* to the conversation. As I will explore more fully in Chapter Four, these six categories particularly speak to the narrative representations of teenagers in YA literature, characters who maintain intense relationships with family and friends due to age and proximity, who are often experiencing their first romantic relationships, and whose sense of self is developing rapidly. The consideration of these different types of love has provided a greater range for my thinking about love, beyond the stereotypical considerations of romantic love, and broadened my examination of love in the YA novels in my research corpus. While romantic love is the focus of the majority of my analysis throughout the thesis, it is not the only category worthy of discussion because love, as mediated through its multitude of relationships, 'makes us who we are' (Lewis, et al. viii).

Having established my understanding and usage of the term lesbian love story, I want to situate those narratives within the larger field of LGBTQ YA literature. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006), Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins analyse a bibliography of nearly 200 YA novels and short story collections, the total number of texts published in the US from 1969-2004 that featured any LGBTQ character. Importantly, a third of those titles were published in the last five years of their study, demonstrating the rising trend in LGBTQ YA publications at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One of the main intentions of Cart and Jenkins' study is to outline a three-part rubric for discussing the development and portrayal of LGBTQ characters in YA literature. The categories include: 'homosexual visibility', where a character 'comes out either voluntarily or involuntarily' in the narrative; 'gay assimilation',

narratives that present characters who “‘just happened to be gay’”; and, ‘queer consciousness/community’, narratives that depict LGBTQ characters as a part of a larger queer community or as a three-dimensional character whose sexual identity is one aspect of their identity (Cart and Jenkins xx). Within this framework, there is the implicit argument that homosexual visibility is the most basic category for inclusion while queer conscious/community is the best outcome for a narrative with LGBTQ content; a similar assumption underpins the chapter structure of this thesis. As it is a comprehensive survey of the first thirty-five years of LGBTQ YA literature published in the US, Cart and Jenkins’ critical work is foundational to this thesis, and my research specifically uses their discussions and annotated bibliography about lesbian and bisexual characters in YA novels for historical context. My analysis, however, draws out additional patterns and connections specifically relating to the development and narrative construction of same-sex relationships between female characters in literature for young adult readers. Furthermore, my study’s temporal parameters extend twelve years beyond Cart and Jenkins’ study, during which there was an even more rapid growth in the number of relevant narratives than evident at the beginning of the 2000s. The following section, and the thesis as a whole, therefore, seeks to provide answers to the question of whether or not lesbian love stories in YA literature have provided ‘a new literature for a new century’ (128).

Originally, this research project sought to encompass a discussion of same-sex relationships between male protagonists as well, determining how the gay (male) love stories are constructed in narratives for a young adult audience. There has been some critical work on the portrayal of gay male characters in YA novels, such as Thomas Crisp’s analysis of the three central characters in *Rainbow Boys* (2001) by Alex Sanchez in his essay ‘The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*’ (2011), but there has not yet been an in-depth study of gay romantic relationships in YA literature. Novels such as *Boy Meets*

*Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, *Sprout* (2009) by Dale Peck, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, for example, would provide a rich array of material to draw on and the research corpus of male same-sex love stories would likely be twice the number of novels in my research corpus. I would expect that the coming out narrative would be an equally substantial feature in the majority of gay YA novels as it is in the novels to be discussed in this thesis, and that there would be a similar evolution in the resolution of those relationships from ‘unhappy’ endings to ‘happy’ ones over the course of the same time period. However, the YA novels that featured love stories between gay male characters were cut from the research due to the intersecting but ultimately distinct histories of gay and lesbian literature and cultural attitudes in the US. There also appears to be a gendered difference in the communication of love and desire within YA narratives as novels that feature gay love stories tend to include more scenes and detailed descriptions of sex and desire as well as more erotic language (versus romantic language) than lesbian YA novels. B.J. Epstein notes that physical arousal, masturbation, and sex (as well as discussions of HIV/AIDS) feature more heavily in gay YA narratives: ‘As was the case for masturbation, descriptions of sex for gay teenage males tend to be quite detailed. [...] There are references to lubricant, swear words are employed to describe the sexual interactions, and the sexual encounters generally end with an orgasm’ (205). Epstein observes that these scenes can range from the romantic to the over-sexualised, sometimes stereotypically portraying of gay teenagers as ‘sex fiends’ (205). I would suggest that it is probable that gay YA romance narratives build the romantic relationship(s) through a series of physical or sexual intimacies rather than a series of emotional intimacies that begin or culminate with a first kiss, as is the case with lesbian YA romance novels, which I explore in Chapter One.

Similarly, the scope of this research project has not considered how love stories for transgender protagonists have evolved over the same period. When this research project began in 2012, there were no YA novels with transgender protagonists that also featured a love story. The earliest YA narratives with transgender characters, such as *Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters, *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger, *I am J* (2011) by Cris Beam, and *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) by Kristin Cronn-Mills, mainly focused on coming out and the process of transitioning, either socially or medically. *Luna* has received some academic attention, to be addressed in Chapter Two, for its role as the first YA novel to portray an openly transgender character but, overall, transgender YA literature is a brand new area of research. Over the course of this research project, this section of LGBTQ literature has built momentum and there has been some diversification in narratives transgender characters, including the portrayal of romantic relationships for the transgender protagonists. *If I Was Your Girl* (2016) by Meredith Russo tells the story of a transgender girl who has transferred schools during her senior year of high school after her medical transition and begins dating a cisgender boy. In the fantasy novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) by Anna-Marie McLemore, the two main characters, a transgender boy and a cisgender girl, are best friends who fall in love over the course of the narrative. At the moment, the romantic relationships portrayed in transgender YA novels are heterosexual, but there is the potential for homosexual romances in the future as well. The emergence of transgender love stories in LGBTQ YA literature is beginning to replicate a similar pattern to the progression of gay and lesbian representation in YA novels and so it is possible that Russo's and McLemore's narratives could signal a shift in focus away from themes of coming out and transitioning onto other facets of those characters' lives. Even more significant, though, has been the eventual publication of YA texts by transgender authors, including Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* as well as *George* (2015) by Alex Gino and the short story

collection *One in Every Crowd* (2012) by Ivan E. Coyote. The identities of the writers and creators of these stories matter in the delivery and expansion of YA literature about LGBTQ characters, a theme I aim to return to throughout my discussions of texts created by lesbian, bisexual, and queer authors and cartoonists.

Finally, it is important to clarify that this thesis engages with YA literature that openly depicts characters that are identified as lesbian or bisexual within the narratives or whom engage in unequivocal same-sex romantic relationships. I do not attempt to encompass queer children's and young adult literature, or the practise of 'queering' characters and texts. While the term 'queer' actively defies definition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes it as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (8). Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd argue that '[u]nderstanding children's literature as queer rather than more narrowly as gay/lesbian broadens interpretive possibilities' (4). For example, queer readings of children's literature classics, such as *The Little Women* (1868), *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and *Harriet the Spy* (1964) have produced important contributions to the field of children's literature regarding the interpretations of romantic friendships and queer icons.<sup>1</sup> Abate and Kidd also convincingly argue that "'queer children's literature" predates and may outlast the LGBTQ movement' (3). Queer texts for children and young adults predate the twentieth century, let alone the LGBTQ movement, and I sincerely hope that LGBTQ YA literature continues to become '[an] open mesh of possibilities' (Sedgwick 8) in the future. However, I am interested in interrogating how narratives are constructed when the sexual identities and same-sex romantic relationships are made explicit within the

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of these discussions of queering children's literature classics, see Roberta Seelinger Trites' 'Queer Performances: Lesbian Politics in *Little Women*' and Robin Bernstein's 'The Queerness of *Harriet the Spy*' in Kidd and Abate's edited collection *Over the Rainbow* (2011) as well as Tison Pugh's analysis of *The Wizard of Oz* in his book *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature* (2010).

texts rather than reading those identities and relationships into the texts. The YA novels and graphic texts selected for my research corpus have also been produced for a specific, age-related audience within a historical context of changing socio-cultural attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships in the US during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which my analysis will take into account. As an identifier, my use of the term 'LGBTQ' remains inclusive of 'queer', as the 'Q' is intended to reflect the current usage of the acronym in academic and popular discussions of the related literature. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been a character that identifies as 'queer' within a YA novel published in the US, although I expect that statistic to soon change. When the term 'queer' *is* used in this thesis in reference to a character or author, it is employed as an inclusive umbrella term (Abate and Kidd 4; Cart and Jenkins xv; Epstein 6-7) to avoid imposing a monolithic label upon a character or person. With these clarifications in mind, I begin the discussion of the emergence of LGBTQ characters in YA literature.

### **Lesbian and Bisexual Characters and Same-Sex Relationships in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

In the US, the field of LGBTQ YA literature began with the publication of the first YA novel with a gay male character: *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* (1969) by John Donovan. The arrival of Donovan's novel coincided with the Stonewall Riots in June 1969, meaning that the history of the contemporary LGBTQ rights movement overlaps with the open portrayal of LGBTQ characters in YA literature. After *I'll Get There*, six YA novels with gay male characters appeared on bookshelves in the 1970s alongside two more YA novels with lesbian characters, following the publication of *Ruby* in 1976. *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978) by Sandra Scoppettone portrays an

established lesbian relationship between two teenage girls, Jaret Tyler and Peggy Danziger, which is threatened when Jaret is raped and seeks to press criminal charges, an action that would make their relationship public. *Hey, Dollface* (1978) by Deborah Hautzig depicts the friendship between new classmates Valerie Hoffman and Chloe Fox, who eventually acknowledge their sexual attraction to one another, but who ultimately decide not to act on their feelings. This trope of same-sex crushes and brief affairs between the protagonist and a potential love interest, as depicted in *Ruby* and *Hey, Dollface*, was frequently repeated in the YA novels into the following decade.<sup>2</sup> None of the crushes or relationships in these narratives from the 1970s or 1980s amount to a love story, but they did begin to present representations of homosexuality, same-sex relationships, and identity more explicitly over time.

The major exception during this period is *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden. Heralded as ‘the first lesbian love story for young adults’ (Cart and Jenkins x), *Annie on My Mind* recounts the romantic relationship between high school students Liza Winthrop and Annie Kenyon in New York City as they fall in love, break up, and are reunited by the novel’s resolution. This text will be explored more fully in Chapter One as the foundational example for the lesbian YA romance novel: its narrative structure set a precedent for the construction of a lesbian love story for a young adult audience in the decades to follow. *Annie on My Mind* was Garden’s fourth YA novel and while LGBTQ characters had not featured in her previous work, she incorporated other gay and lesbian characters in a handful of her YA novels thereafter. In *Lark in the Morning* (1991), the lesbian teenage protagonist assists two runaway children with the support of her girlfriend. Cart and Jenkins note that *Lark in the Morning* is an early example of a LGBTQ YA novel where the sexuality of the protagonist is not central issue of the

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<sup>2</sup> The examples of YA novels with lesbian characters that portrayed crushes or brief relationships include: *Bouquets for Brimbal* (1980) by J.P. Reading, *The Last of Eden* (1980) by Stephanie S. Tolan, *Crush* (1981) by Jane Fitcher, *Come Out Smiling* (1981) by Elizabeth Levy, *Call Me Margo* (1981) by Judith St. George, *Flick* (1983) by Wendy Ann Kessleman, and *S.P. Likes A.D.* (1989) by Catherine Brett.



narrative (108-109). *Good Moon Rising* (1996) is set within the high school drama club where protagonist Janna (Jan) Montcrief and love interest Kerry Ann Socrides fall in love behind the scenes. The two young women face harassment for their sexuality from their fellow thespians, but the intermediary consequences are not as severe as those in *Annie on My Mind*, a reflection of the minor shift in social attitudes towards homosexuality from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Finally, *The Year They Burned the Books* (1999) features a lesbian protagonist and her gay male best friend while *Holly's Secret* (2000) portrays lesbian adoptive parents. When Garden died in 2014 at the age of 76, her obituaries focused on the significance of *Annie on My Mind* for YA literature in the twentieth century: a book that was 'burned, banned, and [...] the subject of a federal censorship case' (Fox *The New York Times*) as well as a novel that made LGBTQ readers 'feel less alone and helped them come out' (Langer *The Washington Post*). Garden was one of the first lesbian YA authors to publically discuss the response from the young adult readers who connected with her stories of lesbian characters, and *Annie on My Mind* still retains its emotional resonance over thirty years later.

Representation of lesbian characters doubled in the 1990s from the previous decade to a total of eighteen novels, but the majority of these characters were secondary or tertiary to the narrative, more or less relegated to side plots or supporting roles as adults or friends. First, *The Dear One* (1991) by Jacqueline Woodson incorporated adult lesbian secondary characters as mentors, following the pattern of previous lesbian YA novels from the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Second, the new trope of the lesbian mother as an 'issue' to be resolved emerged in the narratives of *Living in Secret* (1993) by Cristina Salat and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) by Jacqueline Woodson. Finally, the year 1999 marked the entry of the lesbian best friend or new friend with the concurrent publication of five YA novels with lesbian friends: *Alice on the Outside* (1999) by

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<sup>3</sup> The YA novels with adult lesbian mentor characters from the 1980s include: *Call Me Margo* (1981) by Judith St. George, *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden, *S.P. Likes A.D.* (1989) by Catherine Brett, and *A House Like a Lotus* (1984) by Madeleine L'Engle.

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Jerome* (1999) by William Taylor, *November Ever After* (1999) by Laura Torres, *Hard Love* (1999) by Ellen Wittlinger, and *Name Me Nobody* (1999) by Lois Ann Yamanaka. (The trope of the gay male best friend as a secondary character in YA literature had begun much earlier in the 1970s.) Wittlinger's *Hard Love* was an exceptional portrayal of opposite-sex friendship and the secondary character of Marisol Guzman is integral to the drive of the narrative, seeming to spring fully formed from the page as she proclaims herself to be a 'Puerto Rican Cuban Yankee Cambridge, Massachussetts, rich spoiled lesbian private-school-gifted-and-talented writer virgin looking for love' (Wittlinger 9) on the page of the zine *Escape Velocity*.

M.E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994) stands out during this decade as a YA novel that portrayed a lesbian love story for its secondary characters. The narrative of *Deliver Us from Evie* is set in rural Missouri and depicts the romance between Evie Burrman and Patsy Duff, as told from the perspective of Evie's brother, protagonist Parr Burrman. The two young women form a secret relationship across class divides and are not deterred by the exposure of their relationship to their families. Instead, Evie and Patsy covertly plan to escape the restrictions of their conservative, Christian hometown by running away together to Greenwich Village. By the novel's resolution, they have started their new life within New York City's established gay community and the Burrman family have accepted Evie and Patsy's relationship. While a heterosexual male character is the protagonist of the narrative, I consider Kerr's novel to be a lesbian love story for its singular focus on the same-sex couple's relationship and the conflicts that arise as a result. Parr's narration is didactic at times in its attempt to educate the reader about gender and sexuality, but it also allows the reader the opportunity to learn and accept the lesbian characters at the same rate as the protagonist. Like Garden, Kerr published additional YA novels with gay characters, such as *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me* (1977) and *Night Kites* (1986). Kerr is also credited with the publication

of the first YA novel to discuss male bisexuality, "*Hello, I Lied* (1997). In this narrative, the male bisexual protagonist dates a gay male character and then develops feelings for a straight female character. *Deliver Us from Evie* is the only YA novel that Kerr wrote featuring a lesbian character, but I will return to Kerr in Chapter Two for her work in lesbian pulp fiction and non-fiction, which she published under different pseudonyms: Vin Packer and Ann Aldrich, respectively.

Five of the eighteen YA novels published in the 1990s featured lesbian protagonists and depicted a range of crushes and romantic relationships. *Dive* (1994) by Stacey Donovan focuses on the protagonist's emotional response to her father being diagnosed with a terminal illness and the comfort she seeks in a friendship with a new female classmate. While their relationship becomes romantic in the final chapters of the book, it is not the central theme or issue of the YA novel. *The House You Pass on the Way* (1997) by Jacqueline Woodson and *Tomorrow Wendy: A Love Story* (1998) by Shelley Stoehr both address unorthodox crushes of the protagonist on a female character—the protagonist's cousin and the protagonist's boyfriend's twin sister, respectively—which do not amount to a relationship in the narrative, despite the suggestion of Stoehr's subtitle. Garden's *Good Moon Rising* and *Dare Truth or Promise* (1999) by Paula Boock both feature lesbian love stories for the protagonists. The latter is a republication of the original New Zealand YA novel, published in 1997, that features three lesbian characters: Louie, Willa, and Cathy. The love story between Louie and Willa is the main focus of the narrative, but they must face major challenges before they are happily reunited in the novel's resolution: the two young women stop Cathy from committing suicide (on the basis of her same-sex desires) and Louie survives a near-fatal car crash after an argument with Willa, echoing portrayals of gay and lesbian YA novels from decades prior.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the total number of gay male characters in YA literature (eighty-nine) far exceeded lesbian characters (thirty), meaning that for every lesbian YA novel, three gay YA novels were published between 1969-1999. Consequently, lesbian YA novels were only a quarter of the LGBTQ YA novels available to lesbian or female bisexual readers who may have been seeking out those narratives during that period. In my examination of the lesbian YA novels of the twentieth century, only three out of thirty narratives feature lesbian love stories between the protagonist and her love interest—Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* and *Good Moon Rising* as well as Boock’s *Dare Truth or Promise*—and one featured a lesbian love story involving two secondary characters—Kerr’s *Deliver Us from Evie*. This means that the *overwhelming majority* of the YA novels with lesbian characters published in the twentieth century either focus on same-sex crushes that do not become relationships or where the protagonist disregards her same-sex desires, or the YA novels feature lesbian characters as secondary to the narrative in roles as parents, mentors, or friends. When Cart and Jenkins conclude their study in the early 2000s, they note that the rate of publication had steadily increased over the decades ‘from one per year in the 1970s to four in the 1980s to seven in the 1990s to the current rate of thirteen per year (from 2000-2004)’ (128). This increase in publication rates was a welcome result in terms of increasing LGBTQ YA representation for readers in the US, but the ratio of lesbian YA novels did not drastically change (twenty-three of sixty-six YA novels published in the 1990s feature lesbian characters). However, the five-year period between 2000-2004 was the first indication that the narrative construction of lesbian characters in YA novels was beginning to shift. Over half the novels feature lesbian protagonists, such as *Finding H.F.* (2001) by Julia Watts, about a road trip the lesbian protagonist takes with her gay best friend through the Southern US, and six of those novels feature lesbian

love stories. In combination with the YA lesbian love stories noted from the twentieth century, this means that there were ten YA novels with lesbian love stories by 2004.

*Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan has the distinction of being the first YA novel to portray female bisexuality as the protagonist considers her bisexuality in her internal monologue and both female characters also express desire for male characters over the course of the narrative. A story of summer love, protagonist Nicola ‘Nic’ Lancaster and love interest Battle Hall Davies meet at a summer school programme and the two teenage girls subsequently have a romantic relationship, break up, and are reunited. Published on the cusp of the twenty-first century, the Kirkus Review for the novel, featured on the back cover of the paperback edition, speaks to the dearth of narratives for female bisexual (and lesbian) young adult readers at the time, stating that Ryan’s novel ‘helps fill a need that is painfully obvious in YA literature’ (‘Empress of the World’). *Empress of the World* is one of ten YA novels with female bisexual characters published between 2001 and 2016 (see Appendix 2 Young Adult Novels with Female Bisexual Protagonists and Love Interests). I acknowledge that my analysis has mainly focused on female bisexual *protagonists*, therefore it is possible that my research may have overlooked YA novels with female bisexual secondary characters published during this period; I have, however, noted the bisexual secondary characters known to me in the requisite appendix. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the tropes and stereotypes associated with bisexual female characters in these novels with the examination of the bisexual protagonist in Malinda Lo’s science fiction duology *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013).

Alongside these developments of lesbian and bisexual characters in YA literature, pressure was also building behind the LGBTQ rights movement in the US by the early 2000s. These political, social, and cultural changes would spark debate and raise the visibility of LGBTQ people, later impacting the publication of such narratives

for a young adult audience. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the AIDS crisis had been a part of the national conversation around gay rights for over twenty years. The federal law ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’, a ban on the open service of gay and lesbian members of the military signed into law by President Clinton in 1994, was still in effect. At the same time, the marriage equality movement was just beginning. In November 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favour of the plaintiff in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* and marriages between same-sex couples commenced in May 2004 in Massachusetts. Subsequently, the city of San Francisco, California, adopted gender-neutral language on its marriage licenses under the direction of Mayor Gavin Newsom and the clerks at City Hall performed same-sex marriages from 12 February 2004 until 11 March 2004, a period nicknamed the ‘Winter of Love’ and recorded in the collection of first-person non-fiction stories *Hitched!* (2005), edited by Cheryl Dumesnil. Even though the marriages were halted, and later declared null and void, by the state courts, the ensuing legal battle was one of the many cases concerning marriage equality eventually brought to the Supreme Court of the United States. Gay and lesbian characters were also gaining ground in television and film. After Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian on her sitcom and in public life in 1997, television shows and films with gay and lesbian characters, such as *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003-present), *The L Word* (2004-2009), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), began to make their mark. This groundswell of activity, both politically and creatively, formed part of the historical and cultural context for the emergence of LGBTQ-centred YA narratives into the twenty-first century.

The year 2003 was a watershed for LGBTQ representation in YA literature in general. The publication of *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, *Rainbow High* (2003) by Alex Sanchez (the sequel to *Rainbow Boys* (2001)), and *Geography Club*

(2003) by Brent Hartinger in addition to the lesbian YA novels, Julie Anne Peters' *Keeping You a Secret* (2003), Tea Benduhn's *Gravel Queen* (2003), and Lauren Myracle's *Kissing Kate* (2003), appeared to signal a sea change in the level and style of representation of non-heteronormative characters. These novels featured gay and lesbian protagonists as well as an array of LGBTQ secondary characters. In particular, *Boy Meets Boy* portrays a gay protagonist, gay and male bisexual secondary characters, and a high school drag queen and is set in a small town in the Midwest. Levithan recalls that the novel was seen to be 'radical' by some readers when it was published because it was simply 'a happy romantic comedy about two boys' ('Boy Meets Boy, Ten Years Later'). Cart and Jenkins refer to *Boy Meets Boy* as containing 'elements of magical realism (or wish-fulfilling idealization)' (145), in part due to the town's utopian acceptance of the range of gender and sexual identities portrayed in the narrative. With this novel, Levithan emerged, and has remained, a major author of YA novels with gay and male bisexual characters. The striking aspect of the emergence of these novels is how they intentionally bring gay and lesbian characters to the centre of their own narratives. This burst of YA novels suddenly expanded the options available to young adult readers as well as signalled the beginning of an upward trend towards more YA novels with LGBTQ protagonists.

That same year, Peters' publication of her first lesbian YA novel, *Keeping You a Secret*, began her career as a major author of lesbian characters in the field of LGBTQ YA literature. Over the next decade, Peters published eight novels with LGBTQ characters, which included *Luna*, *Pretend You Love Me* (2011) (originally published as *Far from Xanadu* (2005)), *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012), and two short story collections, repeatedly placing the lesbian protagonists and her romantic relationships at the centre of the narratives. Peters' oeuvre is the subject of Chapter Two because of her sustained and consistent focus on writing lesbian characters for a young adult audience.

There, I will explore her work as a case study and analyse the shifts in lesbian love stories, such as *Keeping You a Secret, She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011), and *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me* (2014), over the period in which she was writing. While a few additional YA novels with lesbian protagonists were published at the same time as Peters' later novels, such as *Hello, Groin* (2006) by Beth Goobie, *Gravity* (2008) by Leanne Lieberman, and *Love and Lies: Marisol's Story* (2008) by Ellen Wittlinger, Peters remained the dominant voice in lesbian YA novels for the remainder of the 2000s.

The first decade of the twenty-first century concluded with the publication of *Ash* (2009) by Malinda Lo, a YA novel important for its portrayal of a same-sex relationship between the protagonist and her female love interest in a YA fantasy novel. Lo has continued to publish speculative fiction YA novels with lesbian and female bisexual protagonists, following up *Ash* with the publication of *Huntress* (2011), a prequel fantasy novel; the science fiction duology *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* and its companion eBook novella, *Natural Selection* (2013); and the recent *A Line in the Dark* (2017). These novels encouraged the integration of codes and conventions from the romance genre with the fantasy and science fiction genres in the 2010s—not necessarily a new innovation for the fantasy and science fiction genres, but specifically significant for placing lesbian and female bisexual characters at the centre of YA narratives. In Chapter Three, I will examine Lo's first four novels for the ways in which the narratives engage in blending generic conventions from fantasy and science fiction, respectively, with romance tropes to tell lesbian love stories. I will compare Lo's novels to other LGBTQ fantasy and science fiction YA novels and illustrate how she has successively pushed the envelope in terms of diverse representation in her narratives.

There were at least fifteen YA novels with lesbian protagonists, featuring their romantic relationships, published between 2000-2009 and thirty published just between



2010-2016; it will be remarkable to reflect on the growth of this field at the end of the 2010s because the rate of publishing has changed so rapidly in recent years. During that seven-year period, multiple patterns have emerged in the narratives. First, there has been an increase in the number of lesbian YA novels that more consciously participate in and play with genre, or more than one genre. For example, there has been a promising trend of YA novels with lesbian and female bisexual protagonists in science fiction and fantasy, such as *Not Your Sidekick* (2016) by C.B. Lee and *Of Fire and Stars* (2016) by Audrey Coulthurst, and in historical fiction, such *Silhouette of a Sparrow* (2012) by Molly Beth Griffin and *Lies We Tell Ourselves* (2014) by Robin Talley as well as novels such as *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King that straddle multiple genres. Second, there has been an increase in what Peter Hollindale, in an essay of the same name, calls the ‘adolescent novel of ideas’: YA novels which may be noted for their literary quality, but more importantly pose philosophical questions for the reader and wonder about the human experience. Chapter Four will examine this critical concept utilising examples from three YA novels from the 2010s that engage with questions about love as well as participate in multiple genres. Lastly, there has been a sharp rise in the number of YA novels with lesbian love stories at the centre of the narrative. Where three YA novels were published in the twentieth century that featured a love story between the lesbian protagonist and her love interest, more than three YA novels with lesbian love stories were published in the year 2016 alone.

From the 1970s to the 2010s, there has also been an emergence in comics created by lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists that seek to represent an array of gender and sexual diversity. The history of lesbians in comics is a rich one, with influential comics series like *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1986-2005) by Alison Bechdel characterising the members of a queer community for a nationwide audience for nearly twenty years to very recent series like *Lumberjanes* (2015-2017) by Shannon Watters,

Grace Ellis, Noelle Stevenson, and Brooke Allen representing of LGBTQ characters for readers of all ages. The comics form inherently offers new methods for portraying characters and relationships because of its combination of visual and verbal storytelling. For example, where recognisable (or stereotypical) codes for gender and sexuality, such as hair, clothing, or physicality, can be difficult to make visible to the uninitiated reader in text-based forms, the combination of words and pictures in comics allows for iconography to quickly and repetitively do some of the communication work of those identities on behalf of the narrative. Illustration also affords an additional medium in which to emotionally connect with the reader, particularly through the representation of marginalised identities. Comics series such as *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Lumberjanes* provide opportunities for an array of diversity and inclusion because they are focused on a large group of LGBTQ characters, rather than just the protagonist and a love interest in the narrative. More recent publications, such as the texts explored in Chapter Five, have demonstrated an increased awareness of producing and publishing comics for a young adult audience on a variety of themes, making the form a dynamic comparison with young adult novels concerning similar subjects.

The comics form also provides flexibility in narrative construction as the panels, gutters, and pages can break time and space into a multitude of rhythms for the reader to follow and interpret. For example, *Skim* (2008) by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki is presented as a chronological account of a high school student's crush on her female teacher that moves between a set number of local settings, whereas *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden is conceived of as a series of fragmentary panels in which time is elastic and the two young girls are set into impossible landscapes where they tower over mountains and industrial buildings. Like all narratives, comics engage in genre, but lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists have particularly produced a number of graphic memoirs since the mid-1990s, an area which was opened up by *The High School*

*Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* (1995-1998) by Ariel Schrag, who created the four-part archives whilst she was still a teenager herself. The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the rise in popularity in these graphic memoirs with the success of Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and others, such as *Calling Dr Laura* (2013) by Nicole J. Georges and *On Loving Women* (2014) by Diane Obomsawin (Canada). Some of these graphic memoirs, like *Honor Girl* (2015) by Maggie Thrash, particularly focused on the experiences of falling in love for the first time and it is these texts that will be explored more in-depth in the thesis.

The past forty years have witnessed tremendous shifts in the attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships in the US as well as in the representations of LGBTQ characters in literature and graphic texts for a young adult audience. With the emergence of lesbian characters in the 1970s and female bisexual characters in the 2000s, those characters within YA narratives have moved from predominantly occupying secondary character positions to taking on the role of protagonist, from exhibiting a reluctance to claim a non-heteronormative sexuality to being portrayed as an out and proud lesbian or bisexual. These narratives for a young adult audience have also shifted from raising the visibility of marginalised gender and sexual identities, to allowing those characters successful romantic same-sex relationships, to asking fundamental questions about the experience of loving other human beings. In the following section, I explain the selection process for the texts in my research corpus and review the critical work on lesbian and bisexual YA literature and graphic texts. I then discuss how my methodology builds on previous scholarship by specifically examining the lesbian love story for a young adult audience, and the roles of genre and narrative structure within my analysis.

## Lesbian Love Stories: Finding, Researching, and Analysing Texts

In order to build my research corpus, I first set out to locate as many primary sources with lesbian and bisexual characters as possible. Due to the recent timeframe of my research, no physical archive (yet) exists that is dedicated to materials related to LGBTQ children's and YA literature that might have assisted in the compilation of my bibliography. The inclusion of relevant texts to my research also remains variable in institutional spaces, such as public libraries, due to frequent objections regarding content that features representations of homosexuality or LGBTQ characters for a younger readership. The American Library Association (ALA) has recorded data on the most frequently challenged or banned books in libraries since 1990. Picture books with LGBTQ characters have historically been the target of such challenges: *Daddy's Roommate* (1990) by Michael Willhoite and *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989) by Lesléa Newman were in the top ten most frequently challenged books between 1990 to 1999, and *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell was in the same position from 2000 to 2009 (ALA 'Frequently Challenged Books'). However, six out of the top ten challenged books from 2015 to 2016 included YA novels, graphic texts, and picture books with LGBTQ characters, including Bechdel's *Fun Home* (ALA '2015-2016 Challenged or Banned Books'; also see Williams 'Case Study: *Fun Home*'). Therefore, I instead began by seeking out bibliographic resources, such as Cart and Jenkins' *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, and speaking with booksellers, particularly from Gay's the Word and Letterbox Library in London, UK, and Booksmith in San Francisco, US. The majority of the texts in my corpus, though, were

found via online resources and communities, which included: social media tags<sup>4</sup> and profiles dedicated to YA literature, author and cartoonists' websites, themed columns, and book review blogs.<sup>5</sup>

My primary consideration has been in identifying texts written or published for a young adult audience (thirteen to eighteen years old), either as indicated by the age-specific publisher imprint (for example, Simon & Schuster's imprint Books for Younger Readers or Little, Brown's imprint Megan Tingley Books), the age rating (for comics and graphic novels), or the marketing materials for the novel (particularly relevant for pre-2000 texts as YA imprints were not as common). There are, of course, novels and graphic texts that will be read by teenagers that are not categorised as 'young adult' by the publishers (for example, *Ruby Fruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown or *On Loving Women* (2014) by Diane Obomsawin (originally published in Canada)), but the thesis is particularly interested in assessing what is currently produced, or deemed appropriate, for this age group. As I indicated in the first section of the Introduction, I am interested in the narrative communication between the implied (adult) author and the implied (young adult) reader, but the ways in which these texts are produced by the publishers can be impacted by the expected interference of adult 'gatekeepers', such as parents, teachers, and librarians, who might object to such content. Chapter Two will specifically engage with some of these questions of dual audiences when it comes to the peritextual elements of Peters' YA novels.

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<sup>4</sup> The most frequently used tags for YA novels with LGBTQ content from 2012 to 2016 were #GayYA and #QueerYA.

<sup>5</sup> I have found dedicated columns on lesbian, bisexual, and queer women's websites that focus on YA literature or graphic texts to be the most consistent sources of information regarding new publications. While these sources can be more temporary due to the nature of the internet, the breadth of my research corpus is indebted to the following columns: 'Your New School Library' written by Jill Guccini, librarian, for *AfterEllen* (2012-2013); 'Drawn to Comics' written by Mey Valdivia Rude for *Autostraddle* (2013-2017); and 'Ask Your Friendly Neighborhood Lesbriarian' written by Casey Stepaniuk, librarian, for *Autostraddle* (2016-2017). The following websites have also proved to be useful in my research: *The Lesbriary*, run by Danika Ellis; *I'm Here. I'm Queer. What the Hell Do I Read?*, run by Lee Wind; and *Goodreads*.

In order to ground this work on YA novels and graphic texts within its historical and cultural context, I then chose only texts first published in the US, meaning that the research corpus is US-centric, although I will refer to YA novels or comics published outside the US when it is relevant to a larger discussion of themes or publishing trends. The time period for the research corpus was determined by the emergence of lesbian characters in YA literature with *Ruby* in 1976 and the practicalities of the research project wherein the primary research concluded in 2016. From this bibliography, I then selected YA novels and graphic texts which featured lesbian or bisexual *protagonists*, rather than protagonists *and* secondary characters. Over the course of this project, LGBTQ characters written for a young adult audience have remained less than 1% of the characters published in YA literature in the US (Lo ‘My Guide to LGBT YA – Statistics’). Therefore, a fundamental aspect of this research is to highlight the constructions of characters and relationships when lesbians and bisexuals are the centre of their own stories. Finally, the YA novels or graphic texts with lesbian or bisexual protagonists must include a same-sex romantic relationship for a significant period of the narrative. If a narrative featured a romantic relationship between the protagonist and her female love interest(s) *and* its central focus was on love, then the text was identified as a ‘lesbian love story’ and it was prioritised for analysis within the chapters.

My examinations of the YA novels and graphic texts in my research corpus have their foundations in the critical work that has been conducted on LGBTQ YA literature thus far. In 1992, Marjorie Lobban and Laurel A. Clyde published an annotated bibliography on ‘homosexuality in literature for young people’ (ix) for use in the classroom that included picture books and YA novels from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the US. Cart and Jenkins’ work built on Lobban and Clyde’s with their expanded annotated bibliography as well as the additional analysis of their three-part rubric, providing a comprehensive picture of LGBTQ YA literature in the US up to

2004. In 2013, Epstein published a survey of sixty texts from the US and the UK that feature LGBTQ characters in picture books, middle grade novels, and YA novels. Her work sought to make evident the patterns in the representations of ‘issues’, stereotypes, and diversity when portraying LGBTQ adults, teenagers, and children. As such, Epstein provides an exhaustive breakdown of tropes, themes, and characterisations, but she does not offer in-depth analysis of particular books or authors. Thus, the major critical work up until this point has been predominantly focused on trends in the field of LGBTQ literature as a whole and across all age categories.

Abate and Kidd’s 2011 edited collection offers an array of investigations into queer and LGBTQ children’s and young adult literature, but only one chapter focuses on the representation of teenage lesbians. In a reproduction of her 1998 essay, Vanessa Wayne Lee breaks down the depictions of lesbian characters into three categories—‘lesbianism as a threat or problem’, ‘the formation of lesbian identities’, and ‘lesbianism as part of a larger cultural landscape’ (165-166)—using YA novels and films from the 1970s to the 1990s<sup>6</sup> to elucidate her argument. Related to Lee’s work, Caroline E. Jones argues that lesbian YA novels move from the ‘homoplot’ of the narratives published in the twentieth century to the ‘progressive novel’ in the early twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup> Jones’ work echoes Cart and Jenkins’ findings but with the specific focus on, and call for, YA novels with representations of the latter category of lesbian characters. Bonnie Kneen’s 2015 article examines representations of male and female bisexual in twenty-first century YA novels, including *Empress of the World*, finding that the narratives ranged, like lesbian YA novels, from the essentialist stereotypes of bisexuals to portraying bisexuality as experiencing desire for more than one gender. A few other publications

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<sup>6</sup> The texts examined in Lee’s essay include: novels, such as *Hey, Dollface* (1978) by Deborah Hautzig, *Come Out Smiling* (1981) by Elizabeth Levy, *Annie on My Mind* (1982) and *Good Moon Rising* (1996) by Nancy Garden, *Happy Endings are All Alike* (1978) by Sandra Scoppettone, and *Dive* (1994) by Stacey Donovan; and television and films, such as *More Than Friends: The Coming Out of Heidi Lieter* (1995), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), and *Heavenly Creatures* (1994).

<sup>7</sup> For the twenty-first century lesbian YA novels, Jones analyses *Empress of the World*, *Gravel Queen*, *Keeping You a Secret*, and *The Bermudez Triangle* (2004) by Maureen Johnson

have analysed the representations of lesbian or bisexual characters in single texts, such as Abate's 2007 article on *Deliver Us from Evie* and Jon Michael Wargo's 2014 essay on *Ash*, and Wendy Keys, Elizabeth Marshall, and Barbara Pini have examined queer rurality<sup>8</sup>—the experience of being queer in rural spaces—in lesbian YA novels. Each of these examinations has focused on the representation of the lesbian or bisexual characters with little attention paid to their identities with regard to their romantic relationships or how the love story constructs the overall narrative.

Scholarly attention on comics and graphic novels with lesbian and bisexual characters has mainly focused on the representations of gender and sexuality in work created by lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists, particular on the work of Alison Bechdel and Ariel Schrag. Adrienne Shaw has examined the work of Bechdel, Schrag, Diane DiMassa, and Justine Shaw as cartoonists who create fictional and non-fictional work based on their own experiences as lesbians, whilst Heike Bauer has provided an overview of lesbian comics from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that notes an increase in graphic memoirs following the publication of works by Schrag and Bechdel. Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* has been written about on a number of occasions, as I will refer to in Chapter Five, either in relation to other cartoonists who portray marginalised identities (Allison, 2014) or in discussion of the memoir genre (Bradley, 2013; Watson, 2008). Schrag's work has been examined for its portrayals of adolescence and coming of age: Emma Maguire argues that Schrag 'brings to life an alternative to heteronormative mainstream representations of girlhood' (54), and Gwen Athen Tarbox discusses Schrag's portrayal of losing her virginity to an ex-boyfriend. Tarbox's argument concerns YA comics, but she is one of the few critics to address comics for this age group. My research will add to the critical work on graphic memoirs, but do so specifically through the lens of the narrative constructions of

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<sup>8</sup> For the discussions of queer rurality and lesbian characters, see two essays by Keys, et al.: 'Queering Rurality: Reading *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* geographically' (2016) and 'Representations of Rural Lesbian Lives in Young Adult Fiction' (2017).



relationships (as opposed to sexual identity alone) in comics for a young adult readership.

In my analysis of the texts within my research corpus, my methodology engages with questions of genre, exploring how genre relates to the love story—or, how love stories relate to genre. The YA novels selected for the research corpus have not been chosen based on the generic conventions that they reproduce through their participation in genre(s); rather, the thesis intends to highlight various patterns of generic participation and speculate on how they influence the construction of female characters and their same-sex relationships. My understanding of how texts participate in genre is influenced by Jacques Derrida's proposal that 'a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is not a genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet participation never amounts to belonging' (Derrida 230; qtd. in Frow 25). Derrida's supposition that texts are always already participating in genre, rather than belonging to a genre, has been an important distinction in my analysis of lesbian love stories in YA literature. John Frow elaborates on Derrida's hypothesis by stating that texts 'work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them, genre are open-ended sets, and participation in a genre takes many forms' (28). To participate in genre then is to shape and be shaped by the process. This process of genre matters, Frow suggests, because it is 'central to human meaning-making' (10), and thus influences how the reader makes meaning through their reading experience. By taking into consideration the ways in which genre works upon these novels, the thesis is not only the first in-depth study of lesbian love stories in YA literature, but also the first to consider how genre shapes narrative representations of lesbian and bisexual characters and their romantic relationships for this age-specific readership. The genres that are considered in the chapters of this thesis include: romance, science fiction, fantasy, and memoir, with less extensive explorations into magical realism and historical fiction.

Roughly half of the novels in the research corpus primarily participate in the romance genre, while the other half of the YA novels participate in generic conventions associated with a different genre(s) *and* romance. The majority of the narratives could also be considered contemporary realism.

Texts most obviously participate in genre through the employment of generic codes or conventions that aid in building the world that the reader is then invited to temporarily inhabit. For example, the replication of the betrothal or the marriage as the required resolution for a ‘happy ending’ in a romance novel is one of the most recognisable conventions of that genre. For LGBTQ readers during the twentieth century, however, such a ‘happy ending’ was not an option for the overwhelming majority of the novels published, regardless of their intended audience. In reference to this history, Sara Ahmed discusses the moral undertone to this departure from generic convention and the resulting stereotype of the ‘unhappy queer’. She states: ‘Queer fiction in this period could not give happiness to its characters *as* queers; such a gift would be readable as making queers appears “good”: as the “promotion” of the social value of queer lives, or an attempt to influence readers to become queer’ (*Promise* 88). (Ahmed also employs ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for non-heteronormative sexual identities.) Ahmed argues against this literal reading of the unhappy ending, one that ““works” to secure a moral distinction between good and bad lives’ (89), and invites the reader to consider ‘what it might mean to affirm unhappiness, or at least not overlook it’ (89). She uses the example of the compulsory ‘unhappy ending’ that guaranteed the publication of Vin Packer’s lesbian pulp fiction novel *Spring Fire* (1952) (to be explored more in-depth in Chapter Two) to explain how the unhappy ending became ‘a political gift’ during the twentieth century, ‘a means through which queer fiction could be published (88).

This thesis will return again and again to the concept of the ‘happy ending’ for the romantic relationships in YA novels with lesbian and bisexual protagonists in order to facilitate a discussion of the shift from unhappy to happy endings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Ahmed writes, there are ‘good reasons for telling stories about queer happiness’ (94), but an overreliance on the happy ending can also lead to the reproduction of ‘happiness scripts’, which can be thought of ‘as straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up’ (91). I aim to hold this tension—between the literal readings of the ‘happy ending’ in novels for young adult readers as necessary positive reflections of the lives of lesbian and bisexual people and their same-sex relationships whilst simultaneously acknowledging that, at times, a narrative with an ‘unhappy ending’ can be similarly affirmative—throughout my discussions of the patterns of generic conventions in lesbian love stories in YA literature and graphic texts. This focus on the narrative endings, or resolutions, is also one aspect of my methodological approach to narrative structure in the thesis. I argue that the majority of the lesbian love stories in YA literature share key narrative elements. These events relate to the novels’ participation in genre, but I will also elucidate the relationship between narrative elements and the construction of non-heteronormative identities in young adult characters. For example, how a first kiss with a person of the same sex may advance a romance narrative whilst simultaneously calling into question fundamental aspects of that character’s understanding of her (sexual) identity. The on-going discussion of narrative structure—and its relationship with character construction—is a core aspect of my analysis of my primary texts.

The chapters of the thesis are structured along a spectrum from the conventional to the unconventional, rather than (necessarily) chronologically. The idea of what is ‘conventional’ is relative, and I am using the term in different ways. First, this research takes the love story as portrayed in romance novels to be the most conventional

structure in which to tell such a narrative as they participate in the romance genre by most closely adhering to a recognisable set of generic conventions. By replicating what a reader might expect from the genre, the lesbian YA romance novels explored in Chapter One are not innovative in narrative or form—beyond their inclusion of non-heteronormative characters and relationships, which this research takes as its baseline. Second, these conventional narratives can also be read as aspiring towards ‘homonormativity’, or the objective to recreate a heteronormative relationship structure that emphasises romantic love, monogamous coupling, and long-term commitment. Queer theorists across the subject, from Judith Butler to José Esteban Muñoz, have argued that such aspirations are assimilationist and conservative, as have queer activists who call for political campaigns for LGBTQ rights to move beyond same-sex marriage. The thesis does not take issue with the relationships depicted in lesbian YA romance novels, but it does acknowledge that they are conservative, and thus conventional, portrayals of romantic relationships. Each successive chapter, then, moves outward from this starting point in its discussions of characterisations, genre, and form. The spectrum created by this chapter structure is conceived of as traversing a three-dimensional plane, rather than a continuum; like a multi-faceted object, each chapter is a different face, a different shape, but part of one whole.

Chapter One establishes the concept of the lesbian YA romance novel by defining and outlining the major actors, settings, and narrative tropes by drawing on examples from over half of the research corpus. The most important aspect of this work is to set out three key narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance narrative structure: *the revelation (coming out)*, *the first kiss*, and *the resolution*. I argue that Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* is the foundational example of the subgenre and use close readings from the text to illuminate each narrative element. Further examples from *Sister Mischief* (2011) by Laura Goode and *Everything Leads to You* (2014) by Nina LaCour

are concurrently explored in order to signal the ways in which more recent narratives overlap or depart from Garden's narrative. This analysis draws on discussions of the definitions, essential narrative elements, and reader expectations of previously established areas of romance criticism: romance, teen romance, and lesbian romance. The conventional aspects of the lesbian YA romance narrative set out in this opening chapter will be referred back to and complicated in the subsequent chapters.

The first case study of lesbian YA romance novels in the thesis, Chapter Two examines the work of Julie Anne Peters, a significant figure in portraying lesbian protagonists for a young adult audience. While the narrative structure of Peters' novels reproduces the key narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance novel, I argue her portrayals of the consequences of coming out and the gendered characterisations of her main characters suggests more of a legacy of lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1950s and 1960s than contemporary YA literature. To underpin my analysis, I explore the history of lesbian pulp fiction, highlighting and comparing the work and careers of two other lesbian authors, Vin Packer and Ann Bannon, with Peters' contemporary lesbian love stories. The lesbian love stories in Peters' YA novels remain conventional in their structure and characterisations, but the inclusion of butch characters in the narratives provides an expanded representation of gender diversity in YA literature.

In the second case study of lesbian YA romance novels, Chapter Three argues that the fantasy and science fiction novels of Malinda Lo reproduce the narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance, but that her depictions of lesbian and bisexual characters, and their romantic relationships, move beyond conventional portrayals through their participation in multiple genres. While LGBTQ characters have been more frequently depicted in science fiction and fantasy as secondary characters, Lo has prioritised writing lesbian and female bisexual protagonists in her work, and her novels have remained in limited company since their publication in the early 2010s. To

demonstrate how Lo's novels participate in and are shaped by multiple genres, I will analyse her fantasy novels, *Ash* and *Huntress*, for the narrative construction of the protagonists and her love interests, their romantic relationships, and the world they inhabit, elucidating how her generic engagement further expands the representations of gender and sexuality in YA novels. I then interrogate how the futuristic genre impacts her science fiction duology *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* in the inclusion of sexual, gender, and racial diversity, the depiction of the bisexual protagonist, and the narrative construction of the central polyamorous relationship, which Lo produces with varying degrees of didacticism.

Chapter Four expands the concept of the lesbian love story by exploring theories of love and wonder in three YA novels: *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) by Madeleine George, *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King, and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth. My analysis engages with the concepts of the thought experiment in children's literature and Peter Hollindale's 'adolescent novel of ideas' as I argue that these YA texts are, at their core, asking philosophically motivated questions about the human experience. Alongside the protagonist's wondering aloud and physical wandering, each narrative is principally preoccupied with multiple forms of love—*eros*, *philia*, *ludus*, *pragma*, *agape*, and *philautia*—in addition to the central romantic same-sex relationship. The analysis also takes into consideration the multiple genres in which the narratives participate; in particular, I examine how George's novel is inspired by political activism, how King's *Ask the Passengers* is shaped by magical realism, and how Danforth's *Cameron Post* engages with historical fiction.

Finally, Chapter Five pushes the boundaries of lesbian love stories for a young adult audience one last time by changing the terms of the discussion in both genre and form by examining graphic memoirs by lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists. The

primary texts include: Schrag's *Definition and Potential*, Thrash's *Honor Girl*, and Walden's *I Love This Part*. These graphic texts explore the creator's first loves, same-sex relationships, and first heartbreaks and use of the conventions of the memoir genre to manipulate time and memory. I contend that these cartoonists use the comic form to expand or contract their discussions of sexual identity, force the reader to engage with particular moments, and attempt to emotionally connect with the reader through the comics form. The inclusion of graphic texts and comics in the thesis allows for a broader discussion of the narratives being published for this age-specific readership and offers an interpreted facsimile of reality in comparison with the previously explored fiction novels.

Overall, this research aims to draw critical attention to previously undervalued texts by providing the first in-depth study of lesbian love stories in YA literature. The analysis of the texts in my research corpus is invested in interrogating the ways that love and romantic relationships function in YA novels and graphic texts about lesbian and female bisexual characters for a young adult readership. I argue that there has been a shift in the ways these narratives are told from the final quarter of the twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The majority of these texts interact with genre in varied and significant ways, and my research aims to elucidate how something as seemingly simple as a kiss, for example, can be a key element in how these stories and characters are constructed. The majority of these narratives implicitly communicate ideologies of the acceptance and normalisation of non-heteronormative identities and, collectively, have drastically increased the diversity of representation available to young adult readers. Just as love is central to who we are as human beings, love is central to the narratives examined in the following chapters. I intend to demonstrate in this thesis how the study of these love stories is important, not just for the implied young adult reader, but every reader.

## Chapter One

### **Lesbian Young Adult Romance Novels:**

#### **How *Annie on My Mind* Set the Precedent for a Conventional Revolution**

“Don’t let ignorance win,” said Ms. Stevenson. “Let love” (Garden 232).

When the romantic relationship between Liza Winthrop and Annie Kenyon is exposed in Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (1982), the two young women turn to Liza’s teachers, a long-term lesbian couple, for advice. Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer reveal that they have had to fight their own battles for the right to exist in institutional spaces—in the military and in the education system—and encourage Liza and Annie to be true to themselves as individuals and to uphold their love for one another against the backlash. In the end, Liza and Annie do, indeed, let love win. To the twenty-first century reader in the United States (US), the phrase ‘let love win’ may sound incredibly contemporary. The marriage equality movement has rallied around the call as successive states and, finally, the nation, confirmed the legal right for same-sex couples to marry in 2015, inspiring declarations of ‘Love Wins!’ from tags on social media to red metallic balloons held aloft in front of a rainbow-lit White House (‘Legal battles remain’) to a portrait series focused on capturing the ‘faces of marriage equality’ (Goodrich). Thirty-five years prior, Garden’s inherent message in the pages of *Annie on My Mind* was simply meant to affirm the young lesbian reader and offer a positive example of what is possible when love does win. By writing a lesbian love story with ‘a happy ending’—in other words, a romance—for her young adult readership, Garden created a foundational text that has continued to influence lesbian young adult (YA) romance novels into the twenty-first century.



To elucidate how Garden's novel has made a lasting impression on lesbian love stories in YA literature, this chapter investigates how these novels participate in the conventions of the romance genre and, through that participation, have created a new subgenre. As discussed in the Introduction, my selection criteria for identifying YA novels with a lesbian love story requires the novel to feature a central romantic relationship between a lesbian or bisexual protagonist and her female love interest that is the focus of the narrative. The YA novels to be discussed in this chapter comprise over half of my overall research corpus, meaning that the *majority* of YA novels with female same-sex relationships engage with the romance genre. As such, I will refer to this selection of novels as 'lesbian YA romance novels' throughout the thesis (see Appendix 1). Similar to my use of the word 'lesbian' as an adjective in the phrase 'lesbian love stories', I am once again using it to signal a romantic relationship between two female characters in my discussion of the texts rather than the sexual identity of the characters themselves. To illustrate how lesbian YA romance novels reproduce and amend conventions from the romance genre, the first section of this chapter will triangulate the definitions and essential elements from a Venn diagram of romance influences, which include: popular romance, young adult romance, and lesbian romance. I intend to highlight some of the gaps and overlaps that occur between these genres, creating a common ground from which lesbian YA romance novels derive. Next, I will discuss the generic conventions of lesbian YA romance novels by examining the main actors, settings, and timeframes of the narratives, the majority of which are contemporary realism. Finally, utilising textual examples from *Annie on My Mind*, I propose three key narrative elements that demarcate lesbian YA romance novels as a subgenre, and suggest how those characteristics may or may not be shifting in light of the changing attitudes towards LGBTQ people in the subsequent decades since

Garden's publication, using examples from two contemporary texts: *Sister Mischief* (2011) by Laura Goode and *Everything Leads to You* (2014) by Nina LaCour.

### Definitions and Conventions of Romance Genres:

#### Popular Romance, Young Adult Romance, and Lesbian Romance

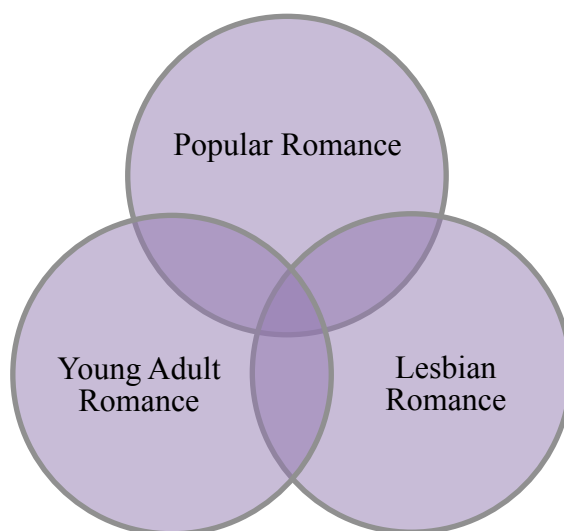


Figure 1: A Venn diagram of romance studies for lesbian young adult romance novels.

Janice A. Radway's foundational reader response study, as recorded in *Reading the Romance* (1984), surveyed a group of Midwestern romance readers in the US in the early 1980s. The Smithton readers' responses illuminated how and why some women read romance novels and what they gain from these texts. Many of the readers had strong expectations for what kinds of stories should be told in the romance novel. For the Smithton readers, 'a romance is, first and foremost, a story about a woman' and it must 'chronicle not merely the events of a courtship, but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one' (64). In addition, the romance novel must maintain a 'resolute focus on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero', a key characteristic that, Radway observes, was 'noticeably absent from those judged to be failures' by the Smithton readers (122). To understand why her readers felt this way, Radway asked her

readers to explain what they meant by an ‘ideal romance’ (a romance the reader found emotionally satisfactory) as opposed to a ‘failed romance’ in their expectations as a reader, allowing them to define for themselves what ‘qualified’ as a romance. The result is a list of thirteen key narrative elements for the ‘ideal romance’ (see Appendix 3) that track the heroine’s progress over the course of the narrative, specifically in relation to her identity *and* her relationship with the hero. This structure culminates in the (re)union of the heroine and hero, which, for the Smithton readers, means that the narrative resolves in a marriage. Radway argues that this list ‘explains the heroine’s transformation from an isolated, asexual, insecure adolescent who is unsure of her own identity, into a mature, sensual, and very married woman who has realized her full potential and identity as the partner of a man and as the implied mother of a child’ (134). There is a sense of a coming-of-age narrative at the heart of Radway’s description of the reader’s ‘ideal’ romance structure, but the readers’ feedback is primarily entrenched in reproducing the heteronormative family structure and the heroine’s place within that unit. When considering the narrative structure of the romance novel, Radway’s thirteen elements are useful in regard to reader expectations, but her model is limited to the Smithton readers’ preferences within the specific subgenre of historical romance series fiction.

In order to more fully examine how the lesbian YA romance novel reproduces or departs from the traditional narrative structure of the romance, Pamela Regis’ work is useful. Her critical work seeks to broaden the definition of the romance novel and provide ‘an expanded vocabulary’ (27) for the purpose of identification and textual analysis. Regis defines the romance novel as ‘a work of prose fiction that tells the story of a courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines’ (19). This definition is grounded in the work of Radway and others, pulling together three common themes identified within her critical analysis on the romance genre: first, ‘the love between heroine and

hero'; second, 'the triumphant, permanent happy ending, usually in marriage'; and, finally, 'the importance of the heroine' (22). However, Regis's expanded definition—which includes eight essential narrative elements and three incidental narrative elements (see Appendix 4)—emphasises the *events* of the romance over shared themes. She argues that this design 'makes the identification of romance novels straightforward. If the narrative elements are present, a given work is a romance novel' (22). To illustrate each element, Regis utilises textual examples from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), in part, to 'lay to rest the notion that all romance novels are hack-work' (28) and to demonstrate the continuity of the romance form through to contemporary novels; my analysis of *Annie on My Mind* in the final section of this chapter seeks to present a similarly foundational example.

Three of Regis' essential narrative elements for the romance novel are of particular interest to the intentions of this thesis. These include:

- *The Barrier*: 'the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry' (32)
- *The Attraction*: 'the reason that this couple must marry. [...] a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society's expectations, and economic issues (33)
- *The Betrothal*: 'the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts' (37)

For Regis, the barrier provides the central conflict and the narrative tension for the romance novel. The attraction between the heroine and hero, she notes, has shifted in 'modern works' where this list of disparate motives has been combined 'under the rubric of "love"' (33)—a strategic move of focusing on 'love' over individual reasons that I, too, have employed for the overall project of this thesis, as discussed in the Introduction. Finally, Regis notes that, unlike Radway's analysis, her final essential element—the 'happy ending'—only requires the *promise* of marriage rather than the

union itself, and that ‘romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century [have not made marriage necessary] as long as its clear that heroine and hero will end up together’ (38). This key difference between the two models may be due to Regis’ focus on events over themes, particularly in regard to the development of the heroine’s identity. Without marriage being vital to the formation and restoration of the heroine’s identity, as it is for Radway, the formal union is not essential to the narrative. It is also noteworthy that Regis contextualises this move away from the necessity for marriage as a symbol for a ‘happy ending’ within romance novels from the 1970s onward. As outlined in the previous chapter, this historical context coincides with the early years of LGBTQ YA literature and reflects social changes as well as a shift in reader expectations for popular literature of the time. While the central romantic couple is still confined to heterosexuality in Regis’ expanded definition, her work on the romance novel is helpful in breaking down the structure of the romance novel, based on literary analysis rather than reader response, into key narrative events that, together, create the romance narrative so familiar to readers. These generic narratives have also set the precedent for the young adult novels that have followed, especially those depicting heterosexuality.

Michael Cart suggests that the emergence of YA literature in the US began with the publication of romance novels specifically marketed to teenagers in the 1940s and 1950s. He explains how this kind of targeted marketing began on a small scale a decade earlier with the ‘emergence of youth culture’ but that the trend ‘picked up steam in the 1940s as marketers realized that these kids—whom they called, variously, teens, teensters, and finally (in 1941) teenagers—were [a burgeoning market]’ (Cart 11). Cart marks the success of Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) as responsible for the publication of subsequent romance novels for this age-specific readership, such as Betty Cavanna’s *Going on Sixteen* (1946) and Rosamund du Jardin’s *Practically Seventeen*

(1949). These teen romance novels focused thematically on the experience of ‘first love’ for the sixteen- or seventeen-year-old heroine and the development of her identity through the support of her romantic relationship with few consequences in the narrative beyond the end of summer or the need for a date to an impending school dance. Writing about the work of the popular and prolific teen romance author Janet Lambert, Anne B. Thompson suggests that the tropes present in Lambert’s work were ubiquitous in the teen romance novels of the 1950s with their ‘focus on and idealization of domesticity and family life [and] the lack of serious problems’ (374-375). In addition to the content, the pervasiveness of pulp novels as a cheap consumer item also contributed to the proliferation of teen romance novels into the 1950s and 1960s. (The concurrent history of lesbian pulp fiction will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two in relation to the work of Julie Anne Peters, because those narratives did not have the same impact on the narrative structure of the majority of lesbian YA romance novels as the three romance traditions explored in this chapter.) The popularity of teen romance continued over the remaining decades of the twentieth century, with notable series such as *Sweet Dreams* (1981-1996) by Janet Quin-Harkin and *Sweet Valley High* (1983-1998) by Francine Pascal, and into the twenty-first century, with successful YA authors like Meg Cabot, Ann Brashares, Maureen Johnson, and Lauren Myracle. Cart notes that during the more recent decades ‘genre bending and blending has become commonplace’ within the genre of YA romance fiction, leading to a propagation of new genres in which he includes ‘gay and lesbian romance’ (95), as I will explore shortly.

In terms of reader responses to young adult romance, several researchers have conducted studies with female teenage readers of teen romance series. Linda K. Christian-Smith’s US study assesses how teen romance series like *Sweet Dreams* ‘package’ readers’ desires within a familiar romance formula (47). Interviewed in the 1980s and 1990s, Christian-Smith’s female readers discuss how they were invested in

the portrayal of the teen romance novel's heroine and the ending of the (heterosexual) romance. The young women of Christian-Smith's study agreed that a 'good' teen romance novel 'had to have a heroine who is strong and assertive, especially towards boys' (55). In addition, the readers required a happy ending for the YA romance novel to be satisfying: 'romance fiction should end happily' when the heroine and hero 'have ironed out their difficulties, and become once again a couple' (55). Thus, when discussing the desirable romance narrative structure, the teenage female readers expressed their expectation and desire for a conventional romance plot wherein the heroine and hero meet, are faced with a barrier to their relationship, and then (re)united as a couple by the novel's conclusion. Christian-Smith points out that her readers' reasons for reading teen romances 'combined elements of fantasy, knowledge and pleasure' (52) and that they assigned a great importance to being able to be involved 'vicariously in the developing romance' (55). Underlying this relationship to reading teen romance, Christian-Smith argues, is, ultimately, 'desire, the yearning to be recognized, possessed, powerful, and the longing for the other' (52). In seeking knowledge, her readers looked to teen romance series fiction as a space of cultural reassurance. Analysing the *Gossip Girl* series, Naomi R. Johnson asserts that '[m]any young female readers regard teen romance as both reflections of how life works and guides for how to be happy and successful' (55). Meredith Rogers Cherland's study with the Canadian Oak Town readers supports Johnson's assessment as she recounts how the girls openly approached the popular *Sweet Valley High* series as a way to 'learn about how to live and how to act, and about how life was *supposed* to go' (97). Cherland observes that the Oak Town readers 'seemed to accept the *Sweet Valley* world as a possible contemporary world' as the series 'entertained and educated its readers with a presentation of a possible life' (97). Her study ultimately demonstrated how a romance series, like *Sweet Valley High*, could be a focus of the reading lives and

identity construction of the teenage female readers. Among their various findings, the continuous thread through each reader response study is that readers relate to teen romance fiction as a template onto which they can map their own experiences and future projections for their identity and relationships.

Christian-Smith's and Cherland's reader response studies are indebted to Radway's study and, in examining each of their works, it becomes clearer that there are subtle overlaps and differences between the expectation for and relationship to romance novels for each respective group of female readers. Both sets of readers derive pleasure from the fantasy of the romance novel and the ability to live vicariously through the central romantic relationship. However, where the teenage reader also seeks knowledge about the workings of life and relationships, the adult reader is not seeking a template for experiences; rather, she prefers to focus on the feelings associated with the romance, declaring the act of reading romance novels as emotionally 'restorative' (Radway 119). Christian-Smith's readers' response that a romance should be about a strong heroine who is assertive and successful with a boy(s) suggests an immature version of the Smithton readers' expectation for a romance to be a 'a story about a woman' whose identity is developed through her relationship with the hero, in which the reader can become emotionally involved. Both sets of readers agree that the most important element of any romance is the 'happy ending'. A marriage or engagement is not required to achieve a 'happy ending' in teen romance novels for these female teen readers; it is enough for the couple to be depicted as together for the foreseeable future, although there is still the implied *possibility* that the teenage couple could one day marry. For both teenage and adult readers, this ultimate union is satisfactory because the relationship through which the heroine has developed has reached its pinnacle. These findings from the reader response studies—such as the reader's pursuit of a future template for her romantic relationships and for life or the desire to *feel like* the object of



a courtship through the reading of a romance novel—are also similarly visible when critical attention is turned to non-heterosexual romance narratives.

In her critical work on lesbian romance novels, Phyllis M. Betz considers the similarities and differences between the lesbian romance novel and the conventional romance novel. The ‘most radical’ distinction between heterosexual romances and lesbian romances, Betz argues, is the ‘encouragement of *two women* to imagine and eventually explore the romantic possibilities of their coming together’ (14, emphasis mine). She elaborates by stating that ‘the lesbian romance presents a story of discovery for its main *characters*’ who ‘seek fulfilment’ through their romantic relationship (14). In the work of Radway and Regis, the development of the heroine’s identity through her romantic relationship is central to the romance narrative; in contrast, Betz argues that lesbian romance novels ‘double this basic narrative movement’ (14). The proposition, then, is that the implied lesbian reader has not one, but two heroines with which to identify, emotionally engage, or imagine emulating. While Betz concedes that lesbian romance novels conventionally depict ‘stunningly attractive’ heroines and tend to reproduce the butch/femme dynamic (a topic to be explored more fully Chapter Two) in the romantic relationships, she maintains that the presence of two lesbian heroines nonetheless offers lesbian readers ‘versions of ways of being and behaving’, both individually and as a partner within a relationship (15). These variations on ‘being and behaving’ are demonstrated through the loose structure of the romance narrative.

Betz writes that ‘[f]inding love, maintaining that love through trials, and the consummation of that love dominate the energies and efforts of the couple’ in the lesbian romance novel (15). The trial (or barrier, to use Regis’ terminology) most often faced by the couple is that one or both of the women is required to come to terms with her sexuality within the narrative. Betz observes that ‘a high percentage of lesbian romances have one woman coming out, either by acknowledging her lesbian identity for

the first time or by accepting that identity and “de-closeting” herself” (15). While more recent lesbian romance novels have moved away from this plot device, the heroine’s internal reckoning remains a key narrative event in the majority of lesbian romance novels, an element that is also central to lesbian YA romance novels. This barrier is overcome by the attraction between the two women as ‘[p]assion becomes the *sine qua non* for everything that happens within the book’s pages’ (15). When the couple finally (re)unite in a happy ending they do so ‘after undergoing a series of trials and separations that test the suitability of the pair and the quality of their commitment’ (16). In the lesbian romance novel, ‘commitment’ has not been historically defined in the same terms as heterosexual romance novels (i.e. marriage or betrothal) as lesbian characters were often denied a happy ending altogether until the mid-twentieth century. As Betz’s research was published before equal marriage rights were granted nationwide in the US, her results do not show the possibility that the definition of a happy ending in lesbian romance novels is now shifting to portray more traditional acts of commitment, such as marriage or engagement; the change in legal status for same-sex couples in the US has already begun to impact lesbian YA literature, a plot device used in Julie Anne Peters’ *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me* (2014), for example, to be discussed in Chapter Two. The expansion of legal institutions like marriage can have a positive impact on social and cultural norms, but Betz also makes the case for lesbian romance novels creating ‘the potential for a re-imagination of what becomes acceptable romantic behavior: if two women can follow the assumed “normative” trajectory of romance, and discover the same intense, passionate intimacy as straight couples, this alters social perceptions and response about love’ (14). Like heterosexual romance novels for teen and adult readers, the lesbian romance novel can provide a template for future romantic relationships—‘how to woo, how to compromise, and how to be wooed’ (16), in Betz’s words—as well as the opportunity to vicariously enjoy the passion of a romance.

## Participating in Genre(s): Lesbian Young Adult Romance

Similar to the romance novels discussed in the previous section, lesbian YA romance novels seek to provide the reader with the pleasure of vicariously engaging with the romance between two young women, whilst also offering representations of lesbian and bisexual characters and their romantic relationships. As Betz argued, such narratives can have a general positive impact on the reader's 'social perceptions and responses about love [between two women]' (14). These narratives can also offer a variety of templates for 'how life [is] supposed to go' (Cherland 97) as well as demonstrate different 'versions of ways of being and behaving' (Betz 15). Within the historical context of this study, understanding how the lesbian YA romance novel functions is important because such a text could be a reader's first introduction to (and identification with) a lesbian or bisexual character, therefore not just an opportunity to offer a *version* of being but potentially even of the *possibility* of being. Triangulated at the centre of my Venn diagram of romance studies, I define this subgenre as a young adult novel that tells the story of the development and resolution of a romantic relationship between the female protagonist and her female love interest(s). This definition is derived from the evaluation of all of the YA novels within my research corpus. From that group of narratives, patterns emerged concerning the main actors, settings, timeframes, and key narrative elements for the lesbian YA romance novel. To varying degrees and at different points in the narratives, these novels participate in the romance genre; at times, these novels also participate in additional genres—realism, science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and historical fiction. Like Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, the majority of the lesbian YA romance novels are written as contemporary realism, and it is these novels that my examination focuses on in this chapter. This approach is to provide tools

and terminology as a basis for the analysis of lesbian YA romance novels that can then be applied in discussions in subsequent chapters as well as by future researchers.

At the heart of the lesbian YA romance is the female protagonist. She is generally between the ages of thirteen and eighteen and enrolled in high school or some type of summer programme. In the majority of lesbian YA romance novels she is white and middle class. Racial and socio-economic representations within LGBTQ YA literature (and YA literature more broadly) are not reflective of the diversity of young adult readers in the US.<sup>9</sup> The protagonist also tends to live in a suburban environment, although there are a few exceptions. For example, Juliet moves from the Bronx, New York, to Portland, Oregon, in *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016) by Gabby Rivera and Emi lives in Los Angeles in *Everything Leads to You* (2014) by Nina LaCour, whilst Pheobe is from rural farm in Maine in *Country Girl, City Girl* (2004) by Lisa Jahn-Clough and Joanna moves to small-town Georgia in *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit* (2016) by Jaye Robin Brown. The YA novel's story is almost exclusively narrated in first-person by the female protagonist, a distinction from teen romance and popular romance novels that rely on third-person omniscient narration. This first-person narration focalises the narrative through the protagonist's experiences, encouraging the implied reader to sympathise and associate more intensely with the character. However, depending on the characterisation of the two central female characters, readers may read against this focalisation and relate more to the love interest, especially in regard to gender presentation, identity categories, or behaviour. For example, in *Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan, a reader could relate more to love interest Battle than protagonist Nic, depending on the reader's background and experiences. Battle is

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<sup>9</sup> I pick up the discussion of racial diversity in LGBTQ YA literature in Chapter 3 with regards to Malinda Lo's YA novels and her *Diversity in YA* campaign. In addition, some notable examples of YA novels with lesbian or bisexual protagonists who are identified as non-white include *M+O 4EVR* (2008) by Tonya Cherie Hegamin, *Not Otherwise Specified* (2015) by Hannah Moskowitz, *Not Your Sidekick* (2016) by C.B. Lee, and *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016) by Gabby Rivera.

described as hailing from a conservative Christian upbringing in South Carolina, she shaves off her blonde hair in a rebellion against parental expectations, and she is stoic; these are all characteristics that Nic lacks in the novel. When a lesbian YA romance novel does employ third-person narration, it tends to do so by staggering the view points of the two central female characters between chapters, as used in *The Bermudez Triangle* (2004) by Maureen Johnson. Without the internal dialogue of the protagonist, the third-person narration used in these exceptions tends to shift the focus away from the emotional world of the character and onto the events of the narrative; however, in these instances the protagonist and the love interest are given equal attention within the novel.

As already suggested, the object of the protagonist's affections in lesbian YA romance novels is the female love interest. I have chosen to use the term 'love interest', despite its popular connotations, because it is the most accurate description of the character's role within the subgenre. She is often a main character, but she is not a second protagonist because her role within the narrative is dependent upon her relationship with the protagonist. The terms 'crush', 'girlfriend', and 'lover' were also considered, but ultimately deemed too narrow or insufficient for the scope of the corpus. In lesbian YA romance novels, the love interest is also usually white and middle class, although more often authors choose to include racial diversity in their novels by depicting the love interest as non-white. For example, Liana is Latina in Peters' *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me* and Rowie is Indian-American in Goode's *Sister Mischief*<sup>10</sup>. This may be because the love interest is sometimes a foil to the protagonist, in identity or personality. Some novels—such as the work of Peters, to be examined in the following chapter, or *Silhouette of a Sparrow* (2012) by Molly Beth Griffin—reproduce a

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<sup>10</sup> I return to this discussion in Chapter 5 in regard to love interests in comics and graphic memoirs, particularly with *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden and *Princess Princess Ever After* (2015) by Katie O'Neill.

butch/femme dynamic in the depiction of the two female characters. There may also be more than one character that operates as a love interest in the novel, such as *Between You & Me* (2012) by Marisa Calin, or in the depiction of bisexual protagonists, where a female love interest and male love interest are treated equally within the narrative, such as in *Far From You* (2014) by Tess Sharpe and the science fiction novels by Malinda Lo (to be explored in Chapter Three). The love interest may also be a year or two older than the protagonist and may be in paid work rather than education; however, it is more likely the love interest will be in the same school or programme, thus providing a context for interaction.

The 'best friend' is also a significant character in the subgenre of lesbian YA romance. Even when s/he is not physically present within the novel, such as in Sharpe's *Far From You* and Emily Horner's *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend* (2010), the importance of this close friendship to the protagonist is central to the narrative. This is a trope shared with YA literature more generally as friendship bonds are incredibly important in teenage experiences and development. In lesbian YA romance novels, s/he fulfils one of three roles within the narrative: the confidant, the antagonist, or the love interest. When the best friend(s) plays a supportive role in the protagonist's development of her sexual identity, s/he encourages her to explore her new romantic relationship. The few best friend characters that are male within these novels fulfil this role and are already out as gay or bisexual themselves within the narrative, as is the case in *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) by Madeleine George and *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (2011) by Alex Sanchez. When the best friend is female and plays the role of confidant, she is usually straight (as are the majority of girls within the protagonists' friendship groups throughout the research corpus). *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit* is a contrasting example, though, where protagonist Joanna and best friend Dana both identify as lesbians and have established those identities before

the novel begins. In other novels, the best friend may be the main source of interpersonal conflict in the narrative as the antagonist, either because she objects to the protagonist's sexuality/relationship or for a reason concerning a specific conflict of the plot. This friendship must be reinstated by the end of the novel in order for the protagonist to fully claim her new identity. In Tea Benduhn's *Gravel Queen* (2003), protagonist Aurin must reconcile her friendship with her best friend Kenney (a girl), who has been jealous of Aurin's romantic relationship, before she can have the 'movie'-style happy ending of her dreams (150). Finally, when the love interest is already well known to the protagonist in the lesbian YA romance novel, she often *is* the best friend. Examples of this trope include *Sister Mischief*, *The Bermudez Triangle*, *Far From You*, and others. In a slightly different take on the best-friend-as-love-interest trope, in Calin's *Between You & Me* the reader is aware that the best friend, addressed only as 'You' in the narrative, is in love with protagonist Phyre before she knows it. Whether she becomes the girlfriend or s/he supports or stands in the way of the new relationship, the best friend is consistently present throughout lesbian YA romance novels.

Due to the age of the main characters, the majority of lesbian YA romance novels strongly feature adult characters as main actors in the plot, such as parents (including single parents), guardians, teachers, pastors, and mentors. Parents and guardians are sometimes depicted in high contrast—either deeply supportive of their daughter, or firmly against the development of her non-heteronormative identity or same-sex romantic relationship. For example, in *The Difference Between You and Me*, Jesse explains that when she came out as a lesbian her parents threw her a party; in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Cam's evangelical, conservative Aunt Ruth sends her to a gay conversion school to be 'cured' of her homosexuality after her same-sex relationship is exposed. Even if the parents or guardians are *minimally* featured in the novel, their divisive feelings may still influence the direction of the romance narrative,

such as with Battle's conservative parents in *Empress of the World*. Generally, though, the parental figures are surprised by their daughter's coming out and ultimately accept her (and her new girlfriend) within the arc of the narrative. In addition, there are sometimes tertiary adult characters that offer the female characters advice or a glimpse into a larger LGBTQ community. Passing examples of minor adult characters range from Tess's older sister in *Sister Mischief*, who gives the protagonist advice from the perspective of an independent university student, to the manager of a LGBTQ homeless youth shelter in Peters' *Keeping You a Secret*, who provides necessary resources for the protagonist. These adult characters can sometimes be teachers, such as Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer in *Annie on My Mind*, some of whom identify as lesbian within the novels, but not all. *Between You & Me* plays on the trope of the illicit student-teacher relationship (common across modes and mediums in such films as *Loving Annabelle* (2006), *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) (Film) and *Cracks* (2009)), by introducing the new theatre teacher, Mia, as a potential love interest for Phyre. Liz Kessler's *Read Me Like a Book* (2015), first published in the UK, is a lesbian YA romance novel goes further and fully explores the lesbian student-teacher relationship, as does *Love & Lies* (2008) by Ellen Wittlinger (although the protagonist is no longer in high school). Overall, though, as characters, teachers offer guidance within the narrative, but do not feature as predominantly in the conflict or resolution as parents and guardians.

Like many YA romance novels, the setting for the lesbian YA romance novel is often a high school in a suburban community. This setting provides an institutional space that is familiar to the protagonist, her friends, and her love interest as well as multiple opportunities for smaller, everyday intimate spaces (for example: lifts to school in the car, sleep-overs in bedrooms, gatherings in tree houses, changing in sports locker rooms, or meeting in the disabled toilet on the second floor of the library). These spaces enable the couple to nurture their relationship in private. Equally, though, the generally



more conservative suburban environment can sometimes form the basis of conflict for the protagonist by exposing her private life during the exploration of her new sexual identity or romantic relationship. While the YA novels explored in this chapter participate in the generic conventions of romance, their settings and events also engage with realism, as a mode. This realistic high school setting affords a selection of timelines for the narrative over which the author can map the growth of the protagonist and her relationship: the academic school year, summer break, or the preparation for a large school event. Primarily, if the narrative spans the academic school year, from autumn to spring, the protagonist's development progresses with the changes in season. For example, Peters' *Keeping You a Secret* begins with the first day of school and ends with the protagonist's high school graduation, during which time the protagonist comes of age through the process of coming out. A smaller number of lesbian YA romance novels take place during the summer—at a summer camp or programme or during the unstructured time outside of school. This time frame allows the protagonist the opportunity to escape from the bounds of her routine and test out new 'ways of being and behaving' (Betz 15) outside of her known institutional spaces. Molly Beth Griffin's historical YA novel *Silhouette of a Sparrow* (2012) is an example of this type of setting as it takes place during the summer of 1926 at a lake resort wherein protagonist Garnet falls in love with a flapper girl and challenges the gendered expectations imposed on her by her family over the course of the narrative.

In addition to the school year or the summer period, the timeframes of some narratives focus on the lead-up to a specific event, such as a theatre production, a sporting event, or a school dance, such as Prom. Francine Pascal, creator of the *Sweet Valley High* series, has argued that Prom is 'probably the quintessential story of high school. It's the moment that comes closest to the romantic vision of life [and its significance is] repeated again only one other time and that would be marriage. [...] it's

that important in the high school life, in the teenager [sic] life' ('186: Prom' *This American Life*). LGBTQ teenagers who wish to attend Prom in real-life in the US—as a same-sex couple or in attire deemed 'gender non-conforming' by individual schools' dress codes (such as a female student wearing a tuxedo)—have received criticism, been barred from, or been the subject of federal court cases.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance of Prom within high school life and the on-going potential for conflict over LGBTQ teenagers attending Prom in the US, it is no surprise that the dance has also been the subject of lesbian YA romance novels. *Tessa Masterson Will Go to Prom* (2012) by Emily Franklin and Brendan Halpin and *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012) by Julie Anne Peters directly address the cross-section of LGBTQ identities and the dance, whilst other LGBTQ novels use a Prom-like event to create narrative tension and potential barriers to romance, such as *The Difference Between You and Me* and *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan.

To return to the definition of the lesbian YA romance novel—a *young adult novel that tells the story of the development and resolution of a romantic relationship between the female protagonist and her female love interest(s)*—I have thus far addressed the main actors, settings, and timeframes for these YA novels, but not the narrative structure. To do so, I will outline and explore three key narrative elements that distinguish lesbian YA romance novels from the romance genres in which they participate: *the revelation* (coming out), *the first kiss*, and *the resolution*. Unlike the essential narrative elements proposed by Regis and Radway, I have not created a complete narrative model for lesbian YA romance novels. While *Annie on My Mind*, and many of the lesbian YA romance novels, include elements from Regis' model such as 'the meeting' of the protagonist and her love interest or 'the point of ritual death'

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<sup>11</sup> Federal court cases, ruling in favour of LGBTQ students, in regards to Prom include *Fricke v. Lynch* and *McMillen v. Itawamba County School District* ('Prom Resources' American Civil Liberties Union); see also, the Human Rights Campaign 'Celebrating and Embracing All Students and Identities at Prom' (Miller).

where it appears the relationship cannot be recovered, the narrative elements I outline are intended to emphasise how lesbian YA romance novels are shaped by the romance genre rather than define their compulsory or essential elements. As the first lesbian YA romance novel, I utilise textual examples from *Annie on My Mind* to explain and demonstrate each key narrative element. This pride of place within my analysis is designed to reflect the narrative precedent set by Garden's novel as well as acknowledge its importance in the field of LGBTQ YA literature and YA literature more generally. The *School Library Journal* included *Annie on My Mind* in their list of 'One Hundred Books that Shaped the Century' (SLJ), and the journal's quote on the back cover of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the novel contends that '[n]o single work has done more for young adult LGBT fiction than this classic about two teenage girls who fall in love'. To illustrate the way that changing social and cultural attitudes towards homosexuality have slightly shifted the execution of those narrative elements, then, I will use further examples from *Sister Mischief* by Laura Goode and *Everything Leads to You* by Nina LaCour as representative of how those narrative events have evolved from Garden's novel. I first examine the revelation (coming out) as a narrative element that these YA novels share with lesbian romance novels generally. Second, I discuss the impact of the first kiss on the development of the central relationship in these narratives and as particular to lesbian YA romance novels. Finally, I will bring attention to the resolution of these narratives and the ways in which they approach the type of 'happy ending' set forth in *Annie on My Mind*.

### *The Revelation (Coming Out)*

The narrative arc of lesbian YA romance novels often depends on the verbal revelation of romantic feelings of one female character to another. However, this event is regularly

precipitated by a different kind of revelation: the protagonist and/or the love interest ‘coming out’ as lesbian or bisexual—or, as a person attracted to another person of the same sex. This revelation is a key narrative element of lesbian YA romance novels and may occur internally for the character (depicted through internal dialogue) and/or externally (to the love interest, best friend, or parent, for example). A character’s coming out offers much potential for narrative conflict, but it is particularly central as an element of lesbian YA romance novels for two reasons. First, as a narrative arc, the coming out storyline is a historically prominent feature of LGBTQ literature, from gay and lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s to the ‘issue’ novels of the 1980s to contemporary YA novels. This is, in part, because coming out narratives are a fundamental aspect of LGBTQ culture. The telling of coming out stories operates within the LGBTQ community as a way of establishing a person’s origins, as lesbian or bisexual, for instance, which Paula C. Rust calls ‘identity histories’ (27), as much as it is explaining one’s non-heteronormative identity ‘within a culture that demands such explanation’ (Pyke). Reflecting on her work on oral histories with LGBTQ adults and reading, Sarah Pyke argues that the coming out narrative is ‘just one of the codified narratives which “justify” queer existence and allow it to be understood, and by extension, sanctioned’ (Pyke). In YA literature, the coming out story operates on multiple levels, including the depiction of LGBTQ lives and affirming those identities within heteronormative culture. Second, the coming out narrative easily maps onto the coming-of-age narrative frequently deployed in YA literature. In the lesbian YA romance novel, the revelation is central to this combination of the coming-of-age/coming out narrative because the expression of the protagonist’s or love interest’s same-sex desires is often intertwined with the development of her identity formation over the course of the novel. As the YA novels are primarily told from the protagonist’s perspective, the revelation is focalised through her experience as she comes to terms with her new identity and relationship

potential. If the protagonist first comes out to herself in the narrative, this type of scene may also operate as a revelation for the reader as well—a confirmation of the protagonist’s non-heteronormative identity. The revelation may take place in one or more scenes, but each of those scenes will have narrative consequences that will shape the development of the heroine’s identity as well as the trajectory of the love story.

*Annie on My Mind* is set in New York City in the early 1980s and is retrospectively narrated by Liza Winthrop, the protagonist, an upper middle class teenage girl who attends a private school. Liza meets her love interest Annie Kenyon, a lower middle class teenage girl from a public school, by chance at the Metropolitan Museum of art on a rainy day in the autumn of their senior year of high school. Garden structures their love story over the course of the academic school year and each season brings a new phase of their relationship. As their relationship blossoms, but before Liza comes out to herself, she describes the feeling of her reciprocal courtship with Annie using highly romantic language: ‘That winter, all Annie had to do was walk into a room or appear at a bus stop or a corner where we were meeting and I didn’t even have to think about smiling; I could feel my face smiling all on its own’ (Garden 107). The romantic descriptions of Liza’s experience focus on her feelings and the innocent bodily response to those feelings—smiling—rather than foregrounding desire or utilising erotic language to communicate a comparable understanding of Liza’s all-encompassing *eros* for Annie. In a scene late at night after one such meeting, Liza is alone in her room and the full force of her realisation ‘crashes’ into her as she identifies her attraction to Annie and what that means for the formation of her sexual identity.

Garden’s YA novel presents this revelation (coming out) as a series of events in which the protagonist first comes out to herself, then to her love interest, and finally to other secondary characters. Liza begins by admitting to herself: ‘*You’re in love with another girl, Liza Winthrop, and you know that means you’re probably gay*’ (143). This

is the first time Liza ‘comes out’ to herself or clearly identifies any kind of label for her sexual identity. She then looks up ‘homosexuality’ in her father’s encyclopaedia ‘but that didn’t tell [her] much about any of the things [she] felt’ (143). Liza is not the first character to turn to a reference text for an explanation of her same-sex desires: it is a trope of literary coming out stories. In the lesbian pulp fiction novel *Spring Fire* (1952) by Vin Packer, for example, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two, protagonist Mitch uses the dictionary and encyclopaedia to help explain her feelings for her female roommate. Like Liza’s experience, Mitch finds the definition unsatisfactory, ultimately deciding that it tells her ‘nothing’ about her experiences (Packer 81). However, both narrative events spur their respective heroines to reach out to her love interest in confirmation of her identity. When Liza next sees Annie, she admits her feelings for Annie as a way of coming out, and then tells her about the encyclopaedia’s explanation of homosexuality. Annie reciprocates Liza’s feelings, but disregards ‘official’ definition, instead offering her a lesbian historical novel, *Patience and Sarah* (1969) by Isabel Miller, as a more meaningful reflection of the feelings she and Liza are experiencing. Through this intertextual reference,<sup>12</sup> Garden implicitly communicates to the reader that sometimes literature, particularly literature written by lesbian writers, can provide more accurate reflections of same-sex desires than ‘official’ definitions. As a result of her revelation and through the books they read about ‘gay people’ (144), Liza and Annie’s relationship and Liza’s sense of her sexual identity becomes stronger. Next, Liza and Annie are outed to their families when another teacher from Liza’s school catches them in an intimate moment whilst housesitting for Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer. This revelation scene results in the loss of employment for the two lesbian teachers and an expulsion hearing from Liza, which is ultimately ruled in her favour.

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<sup>12</sup> Garden incorporates further references to lesbian texts, such as *Female Homosexuality: A Psychodynamic Study of Lesbianism* (1954) by Frank S. Caprio, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (1972) edited by Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love, and *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, when Liza and Annie housesit for Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer and discover that they, too, are a couple from their bookshelf (Garden 152-153).

Throughout the ordeal, Liza's family is supportive, but they do openly question how 'happy' her future will be as an out lesbian.

Many lesbian YA romance novels repeat a similar succession of revelation scenes with varying consequences, as portrayed in *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) by Julie Anne Peters, *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King, and *Lies We Tell Ourselves* (2014) by Robin Talley, for example. Typically, the protagonist confirms her identity through the experiences of her first romantic relationship, as Liza does with Annie, and the protagonist-parent scene creates additional tension or provides supplemental affirmation. Goode's *Sister Mischief*, a YA novel set in the suburbs outside of Minneapolis, MN, also includes each of these scenes for Esme Rocket, the novel's protagonist and narrator; however, the protagonist-parent revelation scene uniquely serves to build Esme's confidence in the beginning stages of her identity formation, and takes place prior to her first romantic same-sex relationship. In a humorous coming out scene, Esme comes out to her single dad in the novel's prologue:

"So it turns out I'm gay, Pops."

He looks hard at me, not upset, probably just checking if I'm serious. When he doesn't say anything, I keep talking.

"Definitely a homo. Like, Same-Sex City, population Esme. Just a big gay, gay lesbian" (Goode 16).

In a display of love and acceptance, Esme's father acknowledges the importance of what she has just revealed and then offers to make her a sandwich, a nurturing gesture. There is no conflict with Esme's father in this scene, but there is a shift in Esme's character: she is more grounded in her new identity. The revelation scene is the first time Esme uses the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' in the novel and, as a lyricist in an all-girl hip hop group, Esme is portrayed as needing to test the words of her new identity out in the opening so that she can see how 'big, big gay lesbian' resonates with her

understanding of herself. Whereas Liza's coming out storyline is central to the narrative in *Annie on My Mind*, Esme's coming out is not the focus of the novel, even if the narrative still concentrates on her relationship. Goode displaces the coming out narrative, in part, by changing the order of the revelation scenes and placing the emphasis on the protagonist-parent relationship and the parent's overwhelmingly positive response. In doing so, Goode demonstrates that while the revelation scene is still important to Esme's understanding of herself as a lesbian in the twenty-first century, her coming out is not the most important part of her story.

Even more recently, authors of lesbian YA romance novels have removed the coming out narrative from the plot altogether by creating characters that are already aware of and have revealed their non-heteronormative identities to themselves and others. However, these characters, like those in earlier novels, still need to come out to their love interests—or, to confirm that their love interest also experiences same-sex desires. One such novel is LaCour's *Everything Leads to You*, a romance set in Los Angeles in the summer after protagonist Emi Price's senior year of high school. In LaCour's novel, Ava Wilder, the love interest, finds out that Emi identifies as a lesbian two-thirds of the way through the narrative. Ava responds to her by saying: "I just didn't know you liked girls. Well, I thought you might, but I wasn't sure" (LaCour 190). Emi is surprised that Ava did not know, but then confesses that it makes sense that she would need to come out to Ava as well. In her internal dialogue, Emi explains why to the reader: "[...] I guess I shouldn't be so surprised. People talk about coming out as if it's this big one-time event. But really, most people have to come out over and over to basically every new person they meet. I'm only eighteen and already it exhausts me" (190). In this scene, LaCour challenges the misconception that coming out is a singular event in a person's life, in addition to advising the reader that the repetition of coming out can be an emotionally taxing experience. In regard to the narrative of *Everything*



*Leads to You*, the reader is already aware that both Ava and Emi identify as non-heteronormative so this scene functions to move the romantic relationship forward rather than offer a template for coming out for the reader—a shift in the ‘versions of being and behaving’ that lesbian YA romance novels provide in some more recent narratives. The exchange is also tinged with desire in Ava’s comment, alluding to the sexual chemistry that has been building since the two characters met and implying Ava’s hope that that desire will come to fruition. In each of these examples, the revelation by the protagonist alters the course of the plot and operates as a key narrative element in the development of the protagonist’s identity in addition to the advancement of her romantic relationship. The following narrative event, the first kiss, is often intricately bound to both of these aspects of the narrative, the identity formation of the protagonist and her romantic relationship.

### *The First Kiss*

While a first kiss appears in almost every kind of romance, the first kiss scene as a key narrative element in a lesbian YA romance novel tends to operate within the narrative in two distinct ways. Primarily, the first kiss scene is an emotional experience for the protagonist in regard to her sexual identity. When prior to the revelation scene, the first kiss often functions as a catalyst for the protagonist’s coming out. If the protagonist has never before questioned her sexual and romantic desires (on the basis of presumed heterosexuality), the experience may produce a spectrum of negative emotions for her—from fear to confusion to anger—fundamentally destabilising her understanding of her sexuality. The revelation will then follow in the narrative as the protagonist comes out to herself, her love interest, and/or additional secondary characters. If the protagonist has been aware of her growing attraction towards a person of the same-sex but has

never kissed a girl before, then the event may be an altogether more positive experience as it confirms her desires and produces feelings of relief and elation. In the secondary instance, as a narrative event, the first kiss scene can also signal a shift in the relationship between the two characters: the movement from a friendship towards a romantic relationship, the formal beginning of a relationship, or the reuniting of the couple. Generally, romantic language, rather than erotic language, is used to describe the physical and emotional experience of the first kiss—focusing on its sweetness, tenderness, or wholesomeness—rather than overtly highlighting the sexual desire between the two female characters. The scene is usually a brief encounter between the protagonist and love interest that is followed by a conversation and does not typically escalate to a sexual encounter at that point in the narrative, if at all. Where the first kiss appears in the narrative varies from plot to plot, novel to novel, but overwhelmingly these scenes serve one or both of these two functions. Most importantly, the scene focuses on the protagonist's emotional response to the first kiss, as demonstrated in *Annie on My Mind*.

When Liza and Annie share their first kiss, Liza is surprised by the experience, narrating that 'before either of us knew what was happening, our arms were around each other and Annie's soft and gentle mouth was kissing mine. When we realized what was happening, we pulled away from each other' (Garden 92). The kiss marks the beginning of their romantic relationship and, in the brief conversation that follows, Liza tells Annie that she thinks she loves her (94). However, this kiss creates great confusion for Liza. It is the catalyst for her to evaluate the construction of her sexual identity and her internal monologue outlines the emotional impact of the kiss on her thinking when she writes:

It was like a war inside me; I couldn't even recognize all the sides. There was one that said, "No this is wrong; you know it's wrong and bad and sinful," and there

was another that said, “Nothing has ever felt so right and natural and true and good,” and another that said it was happening too fast, and another that just wanted to stop thinking altogether and fling my arms around Annie and hold her forever. There were other sides, too, but I couldn’t sort them out (93).

The narrative tension summarised in these warring sides sets up the primary barrier to the central romantic relationship in the novel as Liza’s negative cultural understanding of lesbian relationships is at odds with the recognition of her intense feelings for Annie. In this moment, she describes four main aspects to her feelings: the condemnation of homosexuality, the revelation of her own homosexuality, and the reservation at entering into a romantic or sexual relationship, as well as her enduring desire for Annie. She alludes to the fact that her emotional response is even more complex, but the central theme of her internal monologue exposes the dichotomy between ‘right and ‘wrong’ in her thinking. As their relationship deepens, Liza’s concern shifts from choosing between right and wrong to recognising that she is happy, even if she is ‘still scared’ (106) of the potential repercussions of their same-sex relationship.

In more recent lesbian YA romance novels, the first kiss scene remains a pivotal moment in the novel, but it can function in the narrative to affirm, rather than reveal, the protagonist’s non-heteronormative sexual identity. As recounted in the discussion of the revelation in *Sister Mischief*, Esme knows and announces that she is a lesbian in the prologue of the novel; however, she has never kissed a girl before. Her love interest in the narrative is best friend Rowie, on whom she has a long-standing crush. The opportunity for the first kiss arises when, alone in a tree house, they agree to kiss as an experiment—both girls want to know what it is like to kiss a person of the same sex. For Esme, the kiss corporeally confirms her desires that were previously only theoretical; for Rowie, the experience is as revelatory as it is confusing. Amongst the emotions of pleasure and elation, Esme proclaims ‘*This is what it feels like to be*

*completely human*' (Goode 99) while Rowie is unsure what her feelings mean about her identity. The moment of the first kiss does not end at this point, though; the depiction of Esme and Rowie's kiss builds to illustrate their reciprocal desire and further exploration of physical intimacy. Using erotic language, Esme's narration continues beyond the initial kiss: 'Tentatively, I part [Rowie's] lips with my tongue, meeting hers. She doesn't resist; her tongue tastes sweet. I can feel her beginning to respond. She arches her back a little, and I can feel her small breasts press against mine. I imagine for a moment what they must look like under her dress: brown, round, perfect, her nipples like twin figs' (98-99). This is in contrast to the chaste romantic language that Garden uses in *Annie on My Mind* and in the majority of the subsequent lesbian YA romance novels into the 2000s, validating erotic experiences alongside romantic ones. In *Sister Mischief*, the emotional experience of the first kiss between Esme and Rowie functions differently for both characters—an affirmation of Esme's lesbian identity and the root of the narrative conflict for Rowie as it instigates her exploration of her sexual identity—whilst also still signalling the beginning of their romantic relationship.

The first kiss scene has also begun to appear in the final scene of the lesbian YA romance novel to demonstrate the union of the couple. This change in function can be attributed to the depicted pre-established acceptance of non-heteronormative identities and same-sex desires in newer YA novels where the coming out story is no longer a central aspect of the narrative. This version of the first kiss functions similarly to the engagement or wedding found at the end of popular romance novels, as identified by Regis and Radway, and symbolises the start of an enduring relationship between the protagonist and her love interest. *Between You & Me*, for example, concludes with the couple sharing their first kiss on the porch in the rain in the final 'scene' of the narrated film script. In *Everything Leads to You*, an equally cinematic lesbian YA romance novel, the first kiss is the crescendo to the love story between Emi and Ava in the

penultimate moment of the novel. In her narration, Emi embellishes the moment for the reader as if they were a member of the audience, indicating when the music would start ‘if this were a movie’ and how she and Ava angle their faces to the side ‘in the perfect movie way’ (LaCour 304). Similar to the description of Esme and Rowie kissing, the description of Emi and Ava’s first kiss is very sensual and clearly communicates the sexual desire between the two young women. Emi continues with her directorial descriptions:

But then.

Our lips touch. The imaginary music goes quiet. The room is only a room and we are the miracles. Her mouth is warm and human and soft, her hand presses hard and insistent against my back, her breasts press against mine. My hand grazes the delicate line of her jaw; there’s the whisper of her hair against my fingers as we kiss harder (305).

The account of the kiss initially constructs a wide-angle view of the moment, suggesting that the space itself is no longer relevant and metaphorically referring to the girls kissing as ‘miracles’ at the centre of their own universe. The narration then immediately switches to the corporeal details of the girls’ bodies—mouth, hands, breasts, jaw line, hair, and fingers—emphasising their desire in close-up images as the descriptions become more specific to the two individuals. In Esme’s narration, the idea of being ‘completely human’ is tied up in the experience of the kiss with the confirmation of her sexual identity whereas the prominence of the ‘human’ form for Emi speaks to the universality of desire. There is no conversation after Emi and Ava’s kiss because they are swept into their first day of film on set, but Emi’s internal monologue continues, describing the ‘elated twist in [her] stomach’ (305) as she realises that she is now in a relationship with the woman she loves. She constructs their future together in moments for the reader, from being able ‘to kiss this face again when our day of work is over’ to

being able ‘to make toast for her in the mornings’ (305-306), underscoring the commitment to their newly founded relationship. While lesbian YA romance novels predominantly rely on the first kiss to operate as a catalyst for the consideration of sexual identity early in the narrative, with the resolution as a separate element, there is the possibility that this version of the first kiss may be employed more often in the future.

### *The Resolution*

The resolution scene is the (re)union of the protagonist and her love interest, typically within the concluding lines or pages of a lesbian YA romance novel. Like the protagonists of young adult romance novels, it is unlikely for young adult same-sex couples to become engaged or married within the narrative of a lesbian YA romance novel, but there is usually the implication of profound happiness in the couple’s relationship, as demonstrated in the analysis of the final scene of *Everything Leads to You* above. Such happiness, however, has not always been a guarantee, or a possibility, in LGBTQ YA literature. In the majority of the novels published in the final quarter of the twentieth century, teenage lesbian protagonists, love interests, and secondary characters were often either physically hurt or heartbroken at the end of the YA novels or they remained confused about their sexual identity. Even when narratives allowed the couples to stay together, the lesbian characters often had to go through one or more serious trials beforehand. For example, a natural disaster, flooding, precipitates the reunion of the same-sex couple in *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994) by M.E. Kerr (and later in *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011) by Julie Anne Peters, whose work will be explored more in Chapter Two). In *Dare Truth or Promise* (1999) by Paula Boock, the lesbian characters experience heartbreak, attempted suicide, and a near-fatal car

crash before the central romantic couple are reunited. As discussed in the Introduction, Sara Ahmed argues that these ‘unhappy endings’ were ‘a political gift’, providing ‘a means through which queer fiction could be published’ (88). Publication under these conditions meant that readers of lesbian YA romance novels were still able to read books about lesbian characters and their relationships, to potentially see themselves in print for the first time, even if they had to look past the unhappy endings. *Annie on My Mind* was the first ‘happy ending’ in lesbian YA romance in 1982, but it was not until the early 2000s that the happy ending became a consistent resolution for lesbian YA novels. With these ‘happy endings’ in lesbian YA romance novels, there is still the need, like lesbian romance novels, for the couple to be reunited ‘after undergoing a series of trials and separations that test the suitability of the pair and the quality of their commitment’ (Betz 16), even if those events are not as serious or dramatic as they once were.

As the first YA novel to depict a ‘happy ending’ for the central same-sex couple, *Annie on My Mind* foreshadows its resolution by allowing Liza and Annie to daydream about a life-long partnership. The realisation that Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer are a lesbian couple prompts the two young women to consider what their shared future might look like, and discuss whether they would or would not hide their relationship from others going forward. In response, Annie proposes elopement and professes that she knows she wants to be with Liza ‘forever’ (Garden 154). Liza neither accepts nor denies this proposal and they instead daydream about growing old together, ‘rocking peacefully’ on their ‘sunny porch’ at an imaginary house in Maine (154-155). This idyllic future is interrupted by a series of consequences—for Liza and the teachers—that break Liza and Annie’s relationship apart. The ‘happy ending’ resolution for the YA novel then hinges on Liza: she must reconcile the ‘war inside’ her (93), claim her lesbian identity, and choose to live openly with Annie if they are to be in a relationship

at all. As discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter, the lesbian teachers play an additional role in the resolution. Ms. Stevenson encourages Liza to value love over the ignorance of others (232), and Ms. Widmer reminds Liza that ‘the truth [can make] one free’ (231), referencing the acceptance of one’s sexual identity. The resolution, as a narrative element, then occurs in the final two pages of the novel as Liza rings Annie to say, “‘Annie, Ms. Widmer was right. Remember—about the truth making one free? Annie—I’m free now. I love you. I love you so much!’” (233); Annie responds by proclaiming her love in return. The promise implied in the novel’s resolution is that Liza and Annie will live out their future vision for a lasting union—a template and aspiration already dreamed of and demonstrated within the pages of the novel. The style and approach of Garden’s resolution has been replicated in subsequent lesbian YA romance novels in the 2000s and 2010s, implying the satisfaction of long-term relationship for the lesbian and bisexual characters in the narrative, such as *Wildthorn* (2009) by Jane Eagland, LaCour’s *Everything Leads to You*, and Brown’s *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit*.

There have also been a few variations on the ‘happy ending’ resolution for the lesbian and bisexual protagonist in more recent publications. One example is the adoption of the ‘together for the foreseeable future’ approach, commonly used in heterosexual young adult romance novels. In *Empress of the World*, Nic bemoans the long-distance relationship she and Battle will now have to embark on if they want to stay together, complaining: “‘I want a happy ending, dammit’” (Ryan 212). Battle replies that there is no such ending to attain because they are “‘not even in college yet, for God’s sake’” (212). Battle’s statement implies a belief that they have not yet begun their adult lives and, therefore, cannot expect to have a ‘forever’ happy ending, rebuking the expectation of the romance convention of the ‘happily ever after’ resolution for their love story. The two young women agree to go to the same college



(university) together in the autumn, and the narrative implies that they will commit to exploring their relationship beyond the summer period. An additional variation is also employed in lesbian YA romance novels, wherein the barrier to the relationship is too great for the protagonist and her love interest to recover from; however, by the resolution of the narrative, the two female characters have been able to re-establish the basic friendship, such as in Johnson's *The Bermudez Triangle*. In this YA novel, the central romantic relationship of the novel has been depicted between two of the three characters, Avery Dekker and Melanie 'Mel' Forrest. After Avery and Mel end their relationship, the focus of the resolution is on the recovery of the friendships within their triad group with Nina Bermudez, relationships that have been challenged by Avery and Mel's secret romance.

*Sister Mischief* creates a similar barrier to the central romantic relationship, but takes a more uplifting route for all the characters in its resolution. When love interest Rowie breaks up with protagonist Esme because she is too scared to live their relationship 'out loud' (Goode 228), Rowie explains that she loves Esme but that she is 'not so certain' about what she is (in regard to her sexuality) and what she wants (229). If Rowie was the protagonist the narrative would shift focus to follow the process of her coming out and confirming her non-heteronormative sexual identity in order for the resolution to be achieved for the romantic couple—in a similar manner to Liza's development of identity in *Annie on my Mind*. As love interest, though, the narrative is not about Rowie's growth and so the romantic arc of the novel ends with the couple's break up. However, the narrative still concludes with a 'happy ending' with the reconciliation of multiple interpersonal, platonic relationships of *Sister Mischief*. Esme and Rowie's best friends are Marcy and Tess and, together, they form an all-girl hip-hop crew called Sister Mischief. The resolution is delivered via a guerrilla performance in protest of their school's anti-hip-hop and homophobic policies (a subplot throughout

the novel). The performance is recorded for the group's EP and Esme listens back to it in the final scene of the novel. Here, she indirectly comments on the reformation of the friend group:

The beat peters out as all four of us scatter in laughter, tossing good-natured insults at one another, loving in name-calling. *You dirtbags. SheStorm, where's my beat? You fools didn't even let me get to my hook. I got a beat for you here, slick. Perv.* It's so un-conscious, freed from the body, just the casual intimacy of four girls amassed as something greater than any lone one of them (363).

The return to the 'casual intimacy' and the 'loving in name-calling' (363) of the girls' friendships bookends the novel and brings equilibrium to the tone and language of the text. Instead of heartbreak and disillusionment, the resolution offers a 'happy ending' that is 'greater than any one of them' (363)—or, rather, a pair of them.

## Conclusion

The publication of Garden's *Annie on My Mind* in the 1980s heralded a quiet, slow-building revolution of conventional romances into the twenty-first century by portraying a same-sex romantic relationship between two teenage female characters who were given their own version of a 'happy ending' in the narrative. The implied audience for these novels is the female young adult reader who identifies as lesbian, bisexual, or queer—or whose curiosity about her sexual identity draws her to seeking out such texts; the real-life readership will undoubtedly encompass a broader demographic. The novels in my research corpus overwhelmingly portray positive depictions of same-sex romantic relationships that provide the teenage-equivalent of the satisfactory 'happy ending' and the reader witnesses the protagonist discover and/or confirm her understanding of her non-heteronormative sexual identity. Throughout this chapter, I have aimed to highlight

the main actors, settings, and timeframes as well as propose three key narrative elements that currently demarcate this subgenre of romance. In addition, I have illustrated the ways in which lesbian YA romance participates in and triangulates three genres of romance, from popular romance to lesbian romance to young adult romance. Each successive chapter of the thesis will complicate and illuminate the significant characteristics of the lesbian YA romance novel as I examine authors and texts that further engage with romance and/or alternate genres and forms. These overlaps and gaps in narrative and style are evidentiary of the quickly evolving depiction of lesbian and bisexual female characters—and their love stories—in YA literature. In the next chapter, I examine the lesbian YA romance novels of Julie Anne Peters as structurally similar in narrative to the YA novels discussed in this opening chapter, but I argue that they echo a slightly different tradition in their characterisations and narrative consequences, harking back instead to conventions of lesbian pulp fiction from the 1950s and 1960s. To make this argument, I will compare four of Peters' novels to works by Vin Packer and Ann Bannon, all of whom were lesbian authors who wrote their novels about lesbian characters specifically for a lesbian readership.

## Chapter Two

### **Butches, Femmes, and the Consequences of Coming Out:**

#### **A Legacy of Lesbian Pulp Fiction in the Young Adult Novels of Julie Anne Peters**

The discussion of lesbian young adult (YA) romance novels in Chapter One was intended to demonstrate the ways in which these novels participate in the romance genre(s) and outline the main actors, settings, and narrative elements of those novels. This chapter builds on and develops the understanding of the lesbian YA romance novel through the first case study of the thesis on the works of author Julie Anne Peters. Published between 1999 and 2014, the majority of Peters' YA novels feature a lesbian protagonist, and three of her books are lesbian YA romance novels: *Keeping You a Secret* (2003), *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011), and *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me* (2014). These novels reproduce the main actors and contemporary setting of the narratives examined in the previous chapter, as established by Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* (1982); however, Peters' novels tend to draw more from the generic conventions of lesbian romances, especially as depicted in lesbian pulp fiction novels of the 1950s and 1960s, than other lesbian YA romance novels written during this period. This is particularly evident in regard to the consequences of the revelation (coming out) and the gendered characterisations of the protagonist and her love interest. Peters' lesbian love stories tend to replicate the dynamic of the butch/femme roles for the central romantic couple, typical in mid-twentieth century lesbian pulp fiction and US lesbian working class subculture, which has the result of creating slightly two-dimensional characters and yet also positively contributing to the visibility of butch characters in contemporary YA literature. While none of her characters die, become mentally ill, or renounce their homosexuality, as the lesbian characters do in lesbian pulp fiction, Peters nonetheless explores the serious potential costs of coming out

through the portrayals of parental rejection and youth homelessness. The end of the novel does not necessarily resolve these narrative issues, even if the protagonist and the love interest are given a ‘happy ending’ (unlike the majority of lesbian YA romance novels which usually include a familial acceptance as well as the reunion of the couple). Stylistically, Peters’ novels tend towards the cliché and melodramatic, a characteristic reminiscent of pulp fiction. For example, three natural disasters—a forest fire, a flash flood, and a mudslide—and a car crash precipitate the reunion of the central romantic couple in *She Loves You, She Loves You Not*.... Thus, while Peters’ novels replicate the narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance novel, they also appear to reproduce characteristics of an older generation of lesbian love stories, setting her work apart in the initial decades of the twenty-first century.

To examine these phenomena in her YA novels, I will contrast multiple texts spanning Peters’ writing career—the aforementioned lesbian YA romance novels as well as *Pretend You Love Me* (2011) (originally published as *Far from Xanadu* (2005)) and brief mentions of her other works—with a selection of lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1950s and 1960s. First, I will consider her impact and authorial persona as a lesbian who wrote prolifically for a lesbian young adult audience during the 2000s and 2010s alongside the publication histories of Vin Packer, who wrote *Spring Fire* (1952), and Ann Bannon, who wrote ‘The Beebo Brinker Chronicles’ (1957-1962), lesbian pulp fiction authors who were later discovered to have played a similar role for readers decades earlier. Then, I will examine the consequences of coming out in Peters’ novels, illustrating the tension between the ‘happy ending’ and the emotional or physical impact of coming out with a comparison to Packer’s *Spring Fire*. Next, I will discuss the representations of butch and femme characters in lesbian pulp fiction and Peters’ YA novels, utilising examples from Bannon’s *Beebo Brinker* (1962), to illustrate the range of characters Peters offers readers within those two roles. Finally, I will consider how

the peritextual elements of Peters' novels and lesbian pulp fiction novels address dual audiences and encourage readers to learn how to read the cover art and copy in order to 'find themselves between the pages' (Packer *Spring Fire* ix). Through my analysis, I aim to demonstrate how Peters, like Packer and Bannon, committed to writing and providing lesbian characters for an intended lesbian readership.

### **Lesbians Writing For Lesbians: Pulp Fiction to Young Adult Novels**

For teenage readers at the turn of the twenty-first century, Peters was *the* author who consistently and prolifically wrote lesbian characters for young adult readers from 1999-2014.<sup>13</sup> The majority of lesbian YA novels published during this period were either debut novels (such as *Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan, *Gravel Queen* (2003) by Tea Benduhn, and *Sister Mischief* (2011) by Laura Goode) or one-off novels by already established YA authors (such as *The Bermudez Triangle* (2004) by Maureen Johnson and *Beauty Queens* (2011) by Libba Bray). In contrast, Peters published twenty books for children and young adult readers—ten YA novels, two short story collections, six middle grade novels, and two chapter books (see Appendix 5)—announcing her retirement with the publication of her final YA novel, *Lies My Girlfriend Told*, in 2014. The overwhelming majority of her YA novels and short story collections explicitly focus on non-heteronormative characters, mainly teenage lesbians, and themes affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. (Her first YA novel, *Define Normal* (1999) does not feature LGBTQ characters, but I would argue that the dynamic between the two female characters who form a close friendship is depicted similarly to the butch/femme romantic pairings of her protagonists and love interests in her subsequent YA novels, as will be discussed in a later section.) For example, Peters'

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13 David Levithan (*Boy Meets Boy* (2003)) and Alex Sanchez (*Rainbow Boys* series (2001-2005)) were the equivalent YA authors for gay male teen characters during this period.

YA novel *Luna* (2004) is a story about a transgender girl named Luna that is told from the perspective of her sister Regan. *Luna* has been heralded critically as the first YA novel about a transgender character,<sup>14</sup> and as such the novel has been discussed in multiple surveys of LGBTQ YA literature; Peters' narratives with lesbian characters, though, have received little critical attention.<sup>15</sup> This chapter aims to fill in part of this gap in the research.

In a letter published in the 2005 paperback edition of *Keeping You a Secret*, Peters describes her hesitation in being asked to write a lesbian love story for a young adult audience. She had assumed there would be no readership for such a book, she would be risking the safety of herself and her partner, Sherri Leggett, and she would be opening herself to receiving hate mail. Despite her fears, in the opening pages of *Keeping You a Secret*, her second YA novel and her first lesbian love story, Peters dedicates the novel to Sherri and 'to those who are living out and proud. You are a beacon for others to find their way home'. Looking back, she explains how, after the novel was published, she received 'hundreds and hundreds' of emails from readers who 'loved the book' and 'shared their own coming-out stories, their fears, uncertainties, trials and triumphs' (*Keeping You a Secret* 251). From that point onward, Peters established herself as an author who sought to write about LGBTQ youth, particularly teenage lesbians, and to nurture a dialogue between herself and her readers. She was consistently transparent with her readers about her sexual identity and her female partner in the peritextual elements of her books, such as her biography, and during

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<sup>14</sup> *Luna* is discussed in Cart and Jenkins (2006), Kidd and Abate (2012) and Epstein (2013). YA novels about transgender characters subsequently published during Peters' writing career include: *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger, *Almost Perfect* (2009) by Brian Katcher, *I am J* (2011) by Cris Beam, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) by Kristin Cronn-Mills, and *Gracefully Grayson* (2014) by Ami Polonsky. It is relevant to the themes of this thesis to note that none of the authors of these YA books identify as transgender.

<sup>15</sup> *Keeping You a Secret* is mentioned in Cart and Jenkins, and its narrative discussed in Caroline E. Jones' essay 'From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels' (2013). *Pretend You Love Me* is discussed in regard to queer rurality in Wendy Keys, Elizabeth Marshall, and Barbara Pini's essay 'Representations of Rural Lesbian Lives in Young Adult Fiction' (2017).

interviews and conferences. At times, she also continued to use the dedication page of her novels to express her connection with her readership. For her short story collection *grl2grl* (2007), Peters dedicated the book to ‘all the young readers who’ve shared their stories with me’. For *It’s Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (2012), she dedicated her penultimate book to the ‘JAP Mafia, the most loyal and loving fans in the world’.

This implied dialogue is also evident on her website, which was restored in 2017 by ‘lovely fans’, where she indicates the importance of her readership by privileging their input and interest in various sections, such as a review section that features trade reviews as well as reviews from teenage book vloggers, a letters section with excerpts from her fan mail that often addresses the LGBTQ themes of her books, and a ‘LGBTQI Resources’ section with organisational and university scholarship information. On the individual book pages on her website, she often writes a note to her readers about her ‘inspiration’ behind each narrative. For example, Peters explains that with *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* it was her intention to give her readers another ‘lesbian love story’ but to write a protagonist who is also already ‘secure in her sexuality’ at the beginning of the narrative (‘Inspiration—SLY’). In another instance, she shares that she was asked to write a story about same-sex partner abuse by a teenage reader who had experienced an abusive lesbian relationship. The result was her YA novel *Rage: A Love Story* (2009), and she states that she did so in order ‘to educate [herself] and others on the realities of partner abuse among lesbians’ (‘Inspiration—Rage’). While Peters’ readership will undoubtedly be wider than her young adult lesbian readership, her compassionate intention for young lesbian readers to be able to see themselves reflected in her books—and to gain something significant from that experience—is evident in the material she produces for the public as an author, whether it is fictional narratives or facts about her life.



Lesbian authors of lesbian pulp fiction in the 1950s and 1960s could not be as open about their identities and intentions as Peters was in the early twenty-first century, but they did nonetheless develop a dialogic relationship with their lesbian readership. In the beginning, publishers presumed the intended audience of lesbian pulp fiction to be male heterosexual readers, but the tremendous influx of letters from lesbian readers to lesbian authors proved otherwise. (Many male authors did use female pseudonyms to write lesbian pulp fiction, but all of the lesbian authors who have since spoken about their experiences report strikingly similar epistolary relationships with their readers.) Packer records that *Spring Fire* and her lesbian non-fiction books, to be discussed shortly, received ‘more mail from readers than any author at Fawcett Publications had ever received’ (xi). The women writing to Packer specifically wanted to share their similar experiences or gain advice for moving to Greenwich Village, the established gay and lesbian neighbourhood in New York City. Bannon received mail from lesbian readers for *Odd Girl Out* as well, repeatedly hearing from women who believed themselves ‘to be painfully unique’ (*Odd Girl Out* x) because of their same-sex desires. Bannon writes that these women were gratefully reassured by her work because they could then see that ‘they were not totally alone in the world’ (x). Packer argues that this influx of communication ‘alerted the publishing world to the fact there was a very large audience for books about lesbians’ (Packer ix), and Erin A. Smith writes that editors ‘wasted no time in producing new titles for this unexpected new audience’ (Smith 155, qtd in Mitchell 159).

In *Strange Sisters* (1999), Jaye Zimet contends that Packer and Bannon were among a small group of lesbian pulp fiction authors, including Valerie Taylor, author of *The Girls in 3-B* (1959), and March Hastings, author of *Three Women* (1958) as well, who drew on their own experiences and covertly wrote for and communicated with this new lesbian readership. Hastings has spoken of the ‘secret pact’ she felt she had with

her ‘true and beautiful readership’ (qtd in Forrest xiv) who understood the earnestness in her portrayal of her lesbian characters. Bannon supports Hastings’ sentiment by arguing that she and her pulp fiction contemporaries wanted to ‘[speak] to an audience of women who were starved for connections with others, who thought they were uniquely alone with emotions they couldn’t explain and couldn’t find mirrored in their own worlds’ (‘Foreword’ 15). One of those women was Katherine V. Forrest who went on to become an author herself (*Curious Wine* (1983)) and editor of *Lesbian Pulp Fiction* (2005). Forrest recalls that when she found Bannon’s *Odd Girl Out* (1957) on ‘the drugstore rack’ at the age of eighteen years old, the novel ‘opened the door to my soul and told me who I was. It led me to other books that told me who some of us were, and how some of us lived’ (ix). When Packer, Bannon, and the others did eventually reveal their identities as lesbian pulp fiction authors towards the end of the twentieth century, they ‘emerged to discover [a] warm welcome’ (Forrest xi) from the lesbian community because, just as the authors had hoped, ‘lesbian readers were able to look past the cover: to find themselves between the pages’ (Packer ix).

In order to understand the importance of the relationship between the lesbian pulp fiction author and the reader during the mid-twentieth century, it is relevant to examine the history of pulp fiction in the United States (US). Pulp fiction novels originated in the late 1930s as products that were cheap to produce, cheap to buy, and intended to reach a mass-market readership. To achieve lucrative success, publishers commissioned pulp fiction novels with sensational content as they sought to mould the fictional narratives, Scott McCracken contends, to the ‘fantasies and desires’ (14) of the reader. Smith posits that pulp novels were often seen to be ‘disposable and lacking in literary quality’ because of this thematic quality as the narratives ‘were charged with appealing to baser, corporeal emotions’ rather than the reader’s ‘refined, higher feelings’ (Smith 141; qtd in Mitchell 159). Of those fantasies, lesbianism was one of the

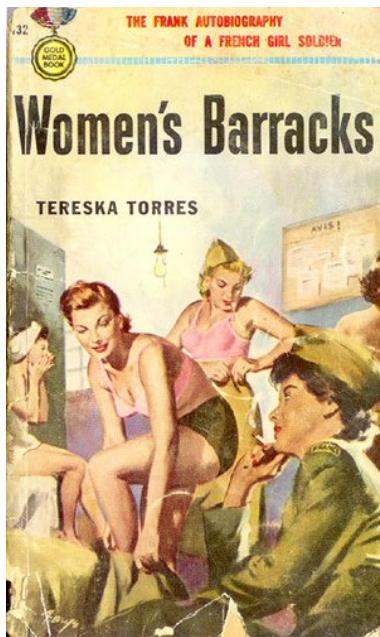


Figure 2: *Women's Barracks* (1950) by Tereska Torres (Zimet 28)

sensationalised topics designed to appeal particularly to the heterosexual male reader (although they were certainly not the only readers). Such a theme initially appears paradoxical, given it appeared in a mass-market product during a period of sexual repression; however, Kaye Mitchell argues that the timing was exactly right as ‘pulp emerged from a mass cultural preoccupation with, and anxiety around, sexuality (in the wake of the Kinsey reports, for example)’ (155) as well as the persecution of homosexuals in the federal government in

the 1950s (what David K. Johnson calls the ‘lavender scare’). Mitchell goes on to note that one of the unforeseen outcomes of the publication of lesbian pulp fiction was that it ‘ended up speaking to, and being adopted by, a sexual subculture’ (155): lesbian subculture.

*Women's Barracks* (1950) by Tereska Torr  s is widely acknowledged as the first mass-market paperback with lesbian content, or the first lesbian pulp fiction novel. Torr  s’ novel was based on her experiences of living and working on behalf of the Allied Forces in London during World War II and the lesbian characters were part of the ensemble cast. *Women's Barracks* was originally written in French and was translated into English for publication in the US with the attention of editor Dick Carroll at Gold Medal Books, an imprint of Fawcett Books. It did very well and its success led Carroll to seek out other narratives with lesbian content to be published as paperback originals, subsequently commissioning Packer to write *Spring Fire* in 1952. The latter pulp novel became incredibly popular and sold 1.5 million copies in its first year of publication. As Zimet writes about the emergence of lesbian pulp fiction, ‘*Women's Barracks* made an impact, but *Spring Fire* started the trend’ (20). Other publishers, such

as Avon, Bantam, Beacon, Hillman, Monarch, and Midwood Tower, followed suit and together over 150 lesbian-themed pulp fiction novels were published during the 1950s and 1960s. Among their authors was Bannon, who wrote the series of five lesbian pulp fiction novels that came to be known as ‘The Beebo Brinker Chronicles’. Altogether, these novels created the ‘golden age’ of lesbian pulp fiction and, more importantly, made lesbian narratives easily accessible in popular culture for the first time.

Visibility was particularly important to Packer, the first of many pseudonyms used by Marijane Meaker. She built part of her career over the second half of the twentieth century by writing fiction and non-fiction about lesbian lives. The publication of her first novel, *Spring Fire*, inspired by the experience of a failed same-sex relationship at boarding school, came with special conditions though. When Packer discussed the potential publication of her pulp novel, she recalls that Carroll, her editor, was very willing to publish the story as long as it passed the censorship of the post office inspectors (the books were then primarily distributed by post). To do that, Packer would, first, need to change the setting for her narrative from a boarding school to a university (thus adjusting the ages of her characters from teenagers to adults) and, second, she could not ‘make homosexuality attractive. No happy ending’ (Packer vi). Packer agreed to these terms, later arguing that while the unhappy ending of *Spring Fire* ‘may have satisfied the post office inspectors, the homosexual audience would not have believed it for a minute. But they also wouldn’t care that much, because more important was the fact there was a new book about us. Suddenly, we were on the newsstands and in the magazine stores, right up front on the racks’ (vii).

Packer carried on writing pulp fiction novels as a suspense writer until the end of the 1960s, but only two of her further pulp novels dealt with homosexuality, *Whisper His Sin* (1954) and *The Evil Friendship* (1958), both fictionalised versions of matricide cases. Meanwhile, she began writing non-fiction accounts of her experiences as a

lesbian in New York City under the name of Ann Aldrich. From 1955-1972, five titles were published by Aldrich: *We Walk Alone* (1955), *We, Too, Must Love* (1958), *Carol in a Thousand Cities* (1960), *We Two Won't Last* (1963), and *Take a Lesbian to Lunch* (1972); the first two books were most recently republished in 2006 by Feminist Press. As Aldrich, she wanted to record the 'courageous journey' that so many women made when they moved to 'the Apple' to live their lives as lesbians (Meaker 'Introduction' *We Walk Alone* xii). She has continued to write about her personal experiences and for a lesbian audience, with works including *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s* (2003), a memoir about her relationship with Patricia Highsmith. Furthermore, from the 1970s to the 1990s, she wrote YA novels under the pseudonym M.E. Kerr, which included *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994), as referenced in the Introduction.

From 1957-1962, Bannon, the pseudonym of Ann Weldy, followed in the path set out by Packer and published five lesbian pulp fiction novels with Gold Medal Books: *Odd Girl Out*, *I am a Woman* (1959), *Women in the Shadows* (1959), *Journey to a Woman* (1960), and *Beebo Brinker*. Three recurring characters feature in all of the novels, but the series became known as 'The Beebo Brinker Chronicles' after the appearance of the titular character, Beebo Brinker, in the second novel; Beebo is the protagonist of the remainder of the books in the series. Like the character of Stephen Gordon from Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Bannon's Beebo has become a canonical reference for the representation of butch characters in literature (Betz 95). The first novel in the series, *Odd Girl Out*, tells the story of sorority sisters Laura Landon and Beth Cullison who, like the protagonist and love interest in *Spring Fire*, begin a passionate, covert romantic relationship within the sorority house. Their affair ends when Beth accepts a marriage proposal from her boyfriend (implying her return to heterosexuality, according to the censor's requirement) and Laura leaves for Greenwich Village, a nod to the gay and lesbian neighbourhood of New York City. The

remaining books of Bannon's chronicles are set in Greenwich and they capture the zeitgeist of the community during the mid-twentieth century. Bannon was the only lesbian author to write a pulp fiction series and, in doing so, she was able to demonstrate the evolution of her characters and the novels' resolutions so that all of the books, uniquely, 'end either with women together or going off to an open future' (Forrest xv). The 'Beebo Brinker Chronicles' stayed with generations of readers as the novels were republished in the 1980s by Naiad Press and republished again by Cleis Press in the 2000s, and Bannon remains a voice for the 'golden age' of lesbian pulp fiction, appearing in the documentary *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992), on the radio, and at book events.

Packer and Bannon were hugely significant in the 1950s and 1960s in supporting lesbian visibility in popular culture and in creating a space for a previously invisible lesbian readership. Their relationships with their readers were initially discreet and carried out through correspondence, but as publishers, such as Naiad Press, Cleis Press, and The Feminist Press, began reprinting their works from the 1980s onward, Packer, Bannon, and other lesbian pulp fiction authors began instead to have those conversations with their readership openly and share their experiences from behind the scenes. After attending to her concern about the repercussions of publishing a lesbian love story for a young adult audience, Peters similarly embraced her role as an author and confidante for lesbian readers, and LGBTQ readers more generally, in the twenty-first century. Peters did not face the same publication conditions as the pulp authors (although adult gatekeepers aware of (homo)sexual content would remain a factor) or the need to hide her identity when she became an author, but her work reflects a sense that she did retain some of the fears and dangers associated with coming out, especially with respect to familial relationships. It is possible that Peters brings into her work a different, more stark perspective than her twenty-first century contemporary authors on

the consequences one can face simply for being gay or lesbian because she was born the same year that *Spring Fire* was published and roughly twenty years prior to the majority of her YA author contemporaries. The next section will examine how the narrative structure of Peters' first two lesbian YA romance novels focus on the conflicts and costs of coming out, reproducing similar themes from *Spring Fire*, before discussing how her final novel demonstrates a more hopeful development in her storytelling.

### **The Consequences of Coming Out**

Each of Peters' lesbian YA romance novels employ the three key narrative elements outlined in Chapter One: the revelation (coming out), the first kiss, and the resolution. In *Keeping You a Secret*, the first kiss acts as a catalyst for the protagonist to reconsider her sexual identity. In *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* and *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*, the first kiss is a confirmation of the romantic desire between the protagonist and love interest. The three novels all resolve with a 'happy ending' in which the two young women are (re)united by the narrative's conclusion with a future that stretches out before them, either in higher education or in their (new) hometowns. In relation to each of these elements, a coming out scene—either to the protagonist herself, the love interest, or a family member—also takes place in each narrative. For two of the narratives, *Keeping You a Secret* and *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...*, the central conflicts of the narratives are in anticipation or a consequence of the protagonist coming out to a parent. As discussed in Chapter One, the decision to accept a new sexual identity and come out is a typical conflict in many lesbian YA romance novels. Phyllis M. Betz writes that the narrative arc of the lesbian romance typically includes both women '[c]oming to terms with their sexuality—individually and jointly' which often results in at least 'one woman coming out, either by acknowledging her lesbian identity

for the first time or by accepting their identity' (15). This holds true for Peters' novels; however, her execution of these scenes more closely mimics the melodrama and rejection evident in lesbian pulp fiction than in the YA novels of her contemporaries. While the resolution of the love stories are hopeful for the couple, the situations that the protagonists find themselves at the end of the novel can be stark and imply potentially greater long-term consequences than the result of their romantic relationships. In this section, *Spring Fire* will be utilised to demonstrate the narrative consequences associated with lesbian love stories before the analysis moves on to discuss the impacts of coming out in Peters' three lesbian YA romance novels.

In Packer's *Spring Fire*, the protagonist Susan 'Mitch' Mitchell is a freshman sorority pledge for Tri Epsilon where her love interest Leda Taylor is a senior sorority sister. The two young women are assigned as roommates and subsequently have a short, but passionate relationship over the course of the narrative. Packer creates narrative tension in the novel by alluding to the attraction between Mitch and Leda in their first scene alone together, foreshadowing the revelation of their homosexuality. Preparing for a double date with their respective male partners, Leda pauses to ask Mitch to scratch her naked back. Mitch is extremely nervous, blushing as she complies; she is not yet able to name her desire for Leda as the cause of her anxiety. During this exchange, Leda analyses Mitch's character in her internal monologue, noting that the pledge's 'strength and force and power' were 'queerly harnessed and checked' (Packer 16) and recalling that she had observed 'a hint of this in her look that first day' because '[i]t was the kind of look that an old acquaintance gives another, in a crowded room where no one is aware that the two have known each other a long time' (16-17). In this passage, Packer offers the lesbian reader two opportunities to read the protagonist and the love interest as lesbian before it is explicitly stated in the narrative. First, while Leda does not directly call Mitch 'queer', she makes the oblique reference that there is something



different about the younger woman. Here, Packer invokes both connotations of the word 'queer': Leda's enigmatic roommate puzzles her, but she is also drawn to the masculine qualities of Mitch's person and behaviour, traits that were associated with homosexuality in women during this period. The latter interpretation of the word would likely have been understood by lesbian readers because it was a common line of thinking in the 1950s that lesbians were actually 'inverts': men trapped inside women's bodies who desired other women and whose masculine gender presentation was valid proof of this 'scientific theory' (Faderman 40-46). Second, Leda also implicates herself as 'queer' when she remembers the exchange of a 'knowing' look between her and Mitch during their initial meeting. For Leda to read Mitch as 'queer' in that scenario, she must also be an equal participant in the exchange who is also, unbeknownst to the others, separate from the larger (heteronormative) group.

The revelation (coming out) scenes build on this first intimate scene between Mitch and Leda, following in orderly succession in the narrative and ultimately resulting in dire consequences for both young women. Mitch's initial reaction to their first kiss is to interpret the experience as meaning that '[t]here was something wrong and ill in the two of them like that' (Packer 61), in part because she does not understand what has passed between them. Through conversations with Leda, Mitch learns the word 'lesbian' and seeks answers in reference books, including a dictionary and an encyclopaedia (a narrative trope of lesbian romance and lesbian YA romance novels discussed in Chapter One), which offer damning descriptions of lesbianism that Mitch accepts as the truth about her sexual identity. When Mitch threatens to break off their intimate relationship, Leda then comes out, confirming that she had been aware of her own sexual identity from a young age. Up until this point in the narrative, the only threat to the central romantic relationship is whether or not Mitch will accept her new sexual identity, and it appears that her desire and love for Leda will outweigh her own

shame and fears. However, prior to publication, Packer agreed with her editor that there would be no 'happy ending' for the lesbian characters. Thus, the fate of the two young women is sealed when they are caught in a state of undress and they are outed by their sorority sisters. Consequently, Mitch is reprimanded by the university and denounces her homosexuality. Leda, on the other hand, refuses to deny her lesbianism, but is therefore deemed 'ill' and assigned to a mental institution. Finally, the novel ends with Mitch professing that 'she had never really loved [Leda] in the first place' (vii). Packer has since stated that she was reluctant 'to have *Spring Fire* returned to print' in the twenty-first century because she was embarrassed by the novel's ending, but she ultimately decided that it was important for the 'younger generation [to know] what lesbian life was like in the '50s' (ix). Michelle Ann Abate also argues that Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994) can be viewed as "'talking back'" to *Spring Fire* as it offers an alternative ending for a similar same-sex couple in its 'pulp predecessor' (234). At the end of the YA novel, the two female characters, Evie Burrman and Patsy Duff, run away and begin a new life together in New York City, which Abate contends 'seems like the logical conclusion to [Packer's] postwar pulp text that she was legally forbidden from writing at the time' (234).

In Peters' *Keeping You a Secret*, protagonist Holland Jaeger unexpectedly falls in love with the new girl at her high school, Cecelia 'Cece' Goddard. As Holland swims before school one morning, her overwhelming desire for Cece chases her with every lap: 'Everything was her. The light, the dark, the day, the night. Her. Her. She was my first thought in the morning, my last thought at night. She'd taken possession of my soul. She was inside of me' (Peters *Keeping You a Secret* 125). This longing is immediately juxtaposed with her attempt to 'drown' (125) out her desire for Cece, forcibly trying to ignore what this revelation might mean for her sexual identity, not unlike the fears driving Mitch to break things off with Leda. Over the course of the

narrative, though, Holland rises to the challenge to accept that she cannot ‘beat the forces of nature’ (125) and claims her new sexual identity in order for her relationship with Cece—and herself—to flourish. Like the first scene between Mitch and Leda in *Spring Fire*, the initial meeting between Holland and Cece foreshadows this tension between what Holland understands and what she is willing to accept. The two young women meet in the most of classic American high school contexts: at their lockers in the hallway before school. Holland recalls that she and Cece ‘slammed our lockers in unison and turned. Her eyes met mine’ (1). As Cece walks away from her locker, it takes Holland a few minutes to puzzle out the other girl’s LGBTQ Pride t-shirt, which reads ‘IMRU?’ with a rainbow triangle underneath. Holland later admits that she was unaware that they ‘had any gays’ (8) at her school until Cece’s arrival, betraying her naivety about her own feelings and desires. The more that the attraction builds between the two young women, the more that Holland pushes back against the possibility of her new sexual identity. When they finally kiss for the first time, Holland admits that she ‘couldn’t fight it’ (142) anymore and accepts that she is in love with Cece. Unlike Mitch, though, once Holland confirms her same-sex attraction, she wants to be ‘out and proud’.

Holland’s turmoil and angst regarding her sexuality preoccupies the majority of the novel, but once that issue has been resolved for the protagonist and her love interest, Peters shifts the conflict—and its consequences—onto Holland’s relationship with her mother. When Holland comes out, her mother physically accosts her by slapping and punching her, calls her ‘sick’ and ‘perverted’, tells her to ‘go to Hell’, and then disowns her, making Holland homeless. Holland seeks refuge with Cece’s family, but she must ultimately find accommodation elsewhere, with their support. Through her protagonist’s predicament, Peters draws attention to the reality of LGBTQ youth homelessness in the US as a result of parental or familial rejection to a child coming out. (In 2012, 40% of

homeless youth identified as LGBTQ (Williams Institute).) In the novel, Holland is able to gain access to a semi-permanent living space in an LGBTQ homeless youth shelter, an organisation that also connects her with other LGBTQ individuals, supports her to find part-time employment that fits around school hours, and assists her in filing applications for her local university. Even with the success of her relationship with Cece and the support of the shelter, Holland's resolution in the novel is still tainted by the consequences of coming out to her mother. When Holland attempts reconciliation, her mother accuses her of not having 'thought about the consequences' (244) that she believes will result from Holland's homosexuality and romantic relationship. Through these dramatic and confrontational scenes, Peters does not shy away from the consequences that some LGBTQ youth still face in the twenty-first century as a result of parental rejection.

Written eight years later, *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* repeats the central themes of rejection in Peters' first lesbian love story. The title of the novel refers to the break-up Alyssa has just experienced prior to the start of the narrative, but the central romantic relationship is between her and love interest Finn. The two young women are introduced when Alyssa inquires about a job at the café in her new town, Majestic, Colorado, and their meeting is charged with a curious attraction, similar to the scenes discussed in *Spring Fire* and *Keeping You a Secret*. In her internal monologue, Alyssa immediately decides that Finn is a lesbian, based on her appearance and attitude alone, referring to her 'gaydar' as evidence. Their love story progresses predictably, a continual but lesser thread throughout the novel because the main theme and conflict of *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* is parental rejection. Even though Peters states on her website that she wanted to write a second lesbian love story with the protagonist secure in her lesbian identity, Alyssa's coming out, and the consequences of her sexual identity, cause great strife. Furthermore, the narrative and character development are not

a radical departure from those in *Keeping You a Secret* and Peters still relies on melodramatic interpersonal relationships to drive the novel. First, the novel opens with Alyssa living with her mother, who has not been involved in her daughter's life since she was a toddler. Alyssa is deeply suspicious of her mother, and the pair must reconcile their mother-daughter relationship before the narrative can reach its version of a 'happy ending'. Second, Alyssa is living with her mother because her father has disowned her after he discovers her and her girlfriend engaging in oral sex. Peters employs comparably damning language in this scene as she does in Holland's coming out scene with her mother: Alyssa's father tells her that she has a 'sickness' and a 'perversion' and that she is not 'his creation' (Peters *She Loves You* 184). Peters does modify two aspects of this scene for the 2010s readership to dampen the shock element: Alyssa is already aware of her father's anti-gay views, and Peters creates the estranged mother for Alyssa to be sent to, rather than making her homeless. Nevertheless, like Holland, Alyssa is kicked out of her home, and when she attempts a second reconciliation with her primary parent regarding her sexuality she is, once again, rejected.

In these two lesbian YA romance novels, Peters is willing to provide a 'happy ending' for the central romantic couple as well as model one accepting parent (Alyssa's mother in *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* and Cece's mother in *Keeping You a Secret*), but she refuses to portray a wholly optimistic representation of child-parent relationships. This may be because Peters wishes to address some of the real 'issues' faced by her readership or because such conflicts create higher drama for the narratives; either way, Peters implicitly reminds her readers that coming out and falling in love with a person of the same-sex can come at high costs. The theme of rejection runs through more of Peters' YA novels as she repeats the trope of the lesbian protagonist falling in love with a heterosexual female classmate in *Pretend You Love Me* and *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)*. These unrequited crushes do happen in real-life, and it may

be helpful and sincerely beneficial for some readers to have their challenging situations reflected back at them. When the themes of heartbreak and rejection dominate what is available to readers, though, as Peters' YA novels did in the 2000s, other readers may take away a secondary message that implies that having same-sex desires and coming out can be inherently difficult. Indeed, this line of thinking was the intention behind the editorial censorship of the lesbian pulp fiction novels in the 1950s and 1960s: lesbian characters could exist, but their authors could not make their lives 'attractive' to readers. Even if Peters' narratives largely celebrate homosexuality and same-sex relationships, they do so with caution.

In her final YA novel, Peters takes a new thematic direction with the narrative in *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*, one that does *not* dwell in rejection. Her style remains consistently melodramatic: the protagonist's girlfriend, Swanee, dies of sudden cardiac arrest in the opening chapter of the novel, after which the protagonist, Alix, discovers Swanee had a second girlfriend, Liana. The novel is driven by Alix's desire to uncover the truth about her girlfriend's other relationship and, in the process, she meets and falls in love with Liana. Yet, the consequences or repercussions of homosexuality and coming out do not dominate the narrative. The only place that negative views about LGBTQ people are discussed is when Alix questions how Liana reconciles her sexuality with her Catholic faith and the anti-gay teachings of the Catholic Church. Instead of drawing on the religious debates around homosexuality and same-sex relationships, Peters offers her readers, particularly those of faith, a different approach to the issue through Liana's response: "For me, though, God is love, pure and simple. And God would never ask me to choose between my truth and my faith" (236). Peters' narrative also reflects the progressive changes in the socio-cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in the 2010s as she includes a same-sex engagement. At the mid-point in the novel, it is revealed that Swanee and Liana, both high school seniors, had purchased

engagement rings and become secretly engaged the month before she died. Whilst highly dramatic, this scene is one of the first moments in LGBTQ YA literature that reflects the momentum of the marriage equality movement of the twenty-first century in the US, plausibly depicting two female characters in rural Colorado becoming betrothed whilst still in high school. (Same-sex marriages did not begin in Colorado until October 2014 and the right to marry was not extended nationwide to same-sex couples until June 2015, both after the publication of *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*, so Peters is reflecting a larger trend rather than a locally specific one.) On the other hand, the engagement is additional evidence against the moral conscience of the dead lesbian character: Swanee not only cheated on Alix, but she cheated on her fiancée, Liana, heightening the level of betrayal. Even as Peters eventually moved away from the thematic focus on the consequences of coming out, the same theme which dominated the lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s and 1960s but not the novels of her own contemporaries, none of her lesbian protagonists escape without extreme repercussions to their personal lives and interpersonal relationships.

Having discussed the portrayal of the central romantic relationships and the protagonists' coming out processes in Peters' lesbian YA romance novels in relation to Packer's *Spring Fire*, in the following section I take a closer look at how the characters of the protagonist and the love interest are constructed in relation to the gendered relationship roles in mid-century lesbian pulp fiction. Peters' work stands out because it portrays both masculine and feminine female characters (also known as 'butch' and 'femme' characters) in her YA narratives. While there are a few other YA novels that portray butch characters, such as *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) by Madeleine George and M-E Girard's *Girl Mans Up* (2016), the majority of the lesbian and bisexual characters found in the research corpus are described in stereotypically feminine terms in regards to appearance, hair style, and clothing choice. In addition to

her exceptional portrayal of butch characters, the majority of Peters' lesbian love stories also reproduce the butch/femme dynamic of lesbian relationships, as portrayed in lesbian pulp fiction (and as often lived) in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Butch/Femme Characterisations**

In lesbian pulp fiction novels, lesbian characters were typically characterised as 'butch' or 'femme' and cast within a romantic relationship of opposites. Butch/femme relationship dynamics operate on the premise that one woman would (or should) fulfil a 'masculine' role in the relationship while the other woman would (or should) fulfil a 'feminine' role. Betz writes about these characterisations, stating that 'to be butch [in a narrative] required a partner who embodied the opposite characteristics—the femme' (95). In lesbian pulp fiction, the reproduction of butch/femme relationships was primarily communicated through markers of dress, attitude, employment, and emotional state. The fictional depictions of butch and femme characters were based on the real-life constructions of the butch and femme identities within Western lesbian subculture, most notably from the 1920s onwards and most visibly in the lesbian subculture of working class communities in the US. Writing about the history of lesbians in the twentieth century, Faderman argues that '[w]hen a young woman entered the subculture in the 1950s she was immediately initiated into the meaning and importance of the [butch/femme] roles, since understanding them was the *sine qua non* of being a lesbian within that group' (168). In the documentary *Forbidden Love*, interviewees discuss how they participated in these roles, particularly through styles of dress and attitude. Some women expressed how they claimed their roles, as butch or femme, because those identities were most closely aligned to their sense of their gender identity. Other women recall being flexible in their roles within their relationships, adopting a butch or femme



identity depending on the role of their partner; Faderman's written history reinforces this oral history, stating that some working class lesbians did move between roles depending on the presentation of their current partner (170).

As the twentieth century progressed, these gendered roles for female same-sex relationships relaxed, and the development of queer theory from the 1990s onward, such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), further disrupted ideas of gender and desire as enacted in intimate relationships. Lesbian romance novels of this latter period reflected the cultural changes with a sharp decrease in the depiction of butch/femme relationships. In YA literature in particular, lesbian characters have overwhelmingly been portrayed as feminine, with little representation of butch characters. Peters' YA novels stand out particularly for their inclusivity of butch characters, which remain important representation as some women continue to identify as 'butch' (as evidenced by Meg Allen's 'BUTCH' 2017 photograph series). Her narratives also tend to reproduce butch/femme relationships with one butch partner—more masculine or androgynous in appearance, more aggressive or protective—and one femme partner—more traditionally feminine in appearance, more emotional and caregiving, which hark back more to a legacy of pulp fiction narratives than contemporary YA novels. To understand the portrayal of the butch/femme dynamic, I will start with a comparison of the construction(s) of butch characters in lesbian pulp fiction and Peters' novels before contrasting those depictions with the femme characters in both sets of narratives.

Beebo Brinker is the quintessential butch character at the centre of Bannon's 'The Beebo Brinker Chronicles'. Betz argues that butch characters are recognisable because they 'replicate a particular masculine look—short hair, men's clothing, usually in dark colors, cologne rather than perfume, no make-up or jewelry, unless a man's watch or ring—common to the time in which the novel is set' (95). In addition, butch characters tend to be portrayed as stoic and working in traditionally masculine jobs. In

Bannon's second novel, *I am a Woman*, Beebo is a seasoned veteran of Greenwich Village and an established butch lesbian within the community who has had multiple relationships with women. Beebo's performance of masculinity is integral to her butch identity, particularly through her wardrobe of men's clothing. Other characters often remark upon her masculine appearance and Beebo comments on this aspect of her identity to others, citing that she will only take a job that allows her to wear trousers, such as working as a delivery driver and a lift operator. In Bannon's final novel in 1962, the prequel to the series, Beebo is fresh from her Midwest farm and not yet the jaded, brooding butch of the other novels. Upon her arrival in Greenwich Village, she is described as 'big-tall' (Bannon 3) with 'broad shoulders' (29) and a 'flat-chested, muscular young body' (32). In addition to the masculine descriptions of her figure, Beebo is already wearing male clothing, such as sport jackets, men's shirts, sweaters, and trousers. Bannon develops Beebo's butch character through certain types of behaviours as well: her character draws reassurance from *not* being 'the stuff that male dreams are made of' (32); she actively pursues her femme partners; and she is someone who 'remained cool until pushed to the breaking point' who then 'responded either with physical or verbal force' (Betz 95).

Peters' novels offer variations on butch characters, from the hyper masculine to the masculine-of-centre, that provide representations of varied gender presentations for lesbian characters in YA literature. According to B.J. Epstein, Mary Elizabeth 'Mike' Szabo in *Pretend You Love Me* is the 'stereotypical butch dyke' (155). Each detail about Mike's life in the narrative adds to her classic construction as a butch character. For example, she is often mistaken for the wrong gender because of her clothing, is talented on the softball pitch, focuses on strength-training at the gym by weightlifting, and aspires to be a plumber, wishing to leave high school early to take over her father's plumbing business in her small rural hometown. In terms of her romantic desires, Mike

falls for the very feminine new student, Xanadu, a heterosexual high school girl who uses Mike's unrequited romantic affections to her advantage. From her male nickname to her physical appearance to her hobbies and working class background, Mike is the most conventional butch character in Peters' oeuvre. Peters' portrayal of Finn in *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* presents a more flexible version of 'being and behaving' (Betz 15) for butch characters and for readers. Finn is described as wearing durable, masculine clothing, such as workwear and a leather jacket; she has long black hair, but does not shave her body hair; she drives a motorcycle, a vehicle more closely associated with men and machismo culture; and her strength is represented through her assertiveness and independence. Her motorcycle and her isolated living conditions—a cabin on a mountaintop that is only accessible by a hazardous dirt road—in part, signify this latter attribute. Her name is also typically a male name, akin to the nicknames used by many other butch characters and she is working class, like Mike and Beebo. All of these butch attributes are immediately apparent to Alyssa when she sees Finn for the first time: 'Dyke! my gaydar screams. She has that self-confident aura. Plus, she's wearing carpenter shorts and leather hiking boots. Dark curly leg hair. Hel-loooo' (Peters *She Loves You* 16). Alyssa's use of the term 'dyke' adds to the construction of Finn as a butch character as this identity, or epithet, tends to be used more in reference to butch women; its usage has also been positively reclaimed by lesbians, with examples including the chartered lesbian motorcycle club, Dykes on Bikes, as well as Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* series (1983-2008).

For a butch character, a femme partner is necessary to complete the narrative's romantic relationship(s). In *Beebo Brinker*, Beebo has romantic and sexual relationships with three different femme women, whose physical descriptions all focus on their feminine attributes. The first relationship is with Mona Petry, who is described as having 'the long dark square-cut hair and bangs; the big hazel eyes; the fine figure, slim

and exaggeratedly tall in high heels' (Bannon *Beebo Brinker* 67), who, even in the heels, needs to look up to see Beebo's face when they dance. Beebo's next relationship is with the incredibly beautiful movie star, Venus Bogardus, whose hourglass figure is described in sensationalistic detail and who, for what little clothing she does wear, only dresses in silks. *Beebo Brinker* resolves with Beebo committing to a relationship with Paula Ash, 'a lovely-looking girl' (80) who is a caring, emotional femme and an integral part of the lesbian community in Greenwich Village. In each relationship, the femme character utilises her femininity to attract Beebo as a butch partner whilst also being portrayed as in need of Beebo's strength and stature. The descriptions of these three femme characters could be used to describe many women in the 1950s and 1960s as Betz argues that femme characters '[assume] the appearances and behaviors generally accepted as traditionally and heterosexually feminine' (103) during this period. These signature aspects of femme characters are communicated to the reader through the descriptions of their feminine clothing and hairstyles (such as dresses, skirts, pearls, heels, lingerie, and long hair), their emotional and nurturing attitudes, and their work in sectors predominantly reserved for women. In addition to stereotypically physical appearances, femme characters also tend to be emotionally demonstrative or portrayed as irrational. In *Spring Fire*, Leda is intensely emotional and it is this volatile characteristic that provides part of the rationale for her admittance to a mental institution at the end of the novel. Femme characters are also predominantly nurturing with their partners and in their work. In *Beebo Brinker*, Paula is the most stereotypically nurturing of the three women with which Beebo has relationships. When the two women are reunited in the novel's resolution, Paula proclaims to Beebo that she wants to give her 'a home' where she'll be 'be loved and care for and spoiled' (232). Outside of the home, femme characters are also portrayed in employment typically associated with

women: in *I am a Woman* Laura becomes a secretary when she arrives in Greenwich Village; in *Beebo Brinker*, Venus is both a movie star and a mother.

Femme characters in Peters' YA novels are less distinctive than their butch counterparts. They do not have the physical markers that immediately code for a non-heteronormative gender or sexual identity and so their characteristics are communicated to the reader through their interests or interactions with other characters. For example, in *Keeping You a Secret*, Holland's femininity is largely constructed through the descriptions of her character as a nurturer. She is very attentive with her baby sister, Hannah, reflecting that '[s]ometimes it felt as if she were mine' (Peters *Keeping You a Secret* 9). Referring to her afterschool job at a nursery, she reflects positively on her relationship with the children: 'I loved little kids. They were so funny, so real. The way they'd crawl into your lap and hang off your neck. Sometimes they were pretty needy, like they weren't getting much affection at home. That was fine with me. I had plenty of love to spread around' (24). Holland's caregiver role codes as traditionally feminine throughout the novel and is in contrast with Cece's more masculine, individualistic approach to her interactions with others. In *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...*, Alyssa's femme character is constructed through a combination of discussions about her physical appearance and descriptions of her emotional state. Other characters remark on Alyssa's physical appearance as traditionally 'beautiful' and looking exactly like her mother Carly, an attractive pole dancer. Much of the novel is taken up with Alyssa's emotional anguish, which mainly manifests itself in her heartbreak over her ex-girlfriend, her difficult relationship with her mother, and the rejection from her father. While neither Holland nor Alyssa are excessively feminine in their appearances, they do '[assume] the appearances and behaviors generally accepted as traditionally and heterosexually feminine' (Betz 103) of the typical teenage girl in the early twenty-first century.

In regard to how the dynamic between the butch and femme characters plays out in the narrative, Peters sets up the relationship between Holland and Cece as an attraction of opposites. In her characterisation, Cece's appearance is described in masculine terms common in the 2000s—baseball caps, baggy t-shirts, loose jeans—and has a signature 'swagger' typical of butch characters. Furthermore, she actively pursues her romantic interest in Holland, asking other classmates for information about her and meeting her before school at her swim practice. Holland, contrasting her butch counterpart, represents the appearance and behaviours of a typical feminine teenage girl. Unlike the femme characters in lesbian pulp fiction, Holland's figure and clothing are not overtly described in the narrative, so her femininity is signalled by other personal attributes: her long blond hair, her choice of sport (swimming is not stereotypically associated with the lesbian community, unlike tennis or softball), her academic achievements, and how 'normal' she is. Holland's femme qualities complement Cece's butch characteristics, which also extend to their after-school employment: Cece works in the kitchen of her uncle's doughnut shop performing messy jobs that require her strength while Holland has her role in the nursery. Their initial exchange at the high school lockers provides the groundwork for the butch/femme dynamic of their relationship within the novel—Cece is the proud, swaggering butch to Holland's traditional femme—and this invites readers to engage with different constructions of lesbian identity as well as the opportunity to relate to either character.

In *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*, her final YA novel, Peters does not reproduce the butch/femme dynamic for the central romantic relationship, although this is not obvious at the novel's outset. At the beginning of the narrative, Swanee occupies the role of the butch character based on her descriptions: she is a strong, competitive track athlete, fiercely independent, androgynous in appearance, and actively pursues multiple feminine partners. Alix and Liana are both stereotypical femme characters in their

descriptions: their appearances are traditionally feminine (long hair, makeup, feminine clothing) and they fulfil feminine stereotypes within their high schools as a ‘good student’ and a cheerleader, respectively. Their relationships thus appear to fit the standard butch/femme dynamic as each femme character, unbeknownst to each other, is romantically paired with the butch character. Once the secret relationships are uncovered after Swanee’s death, however, Alix and Liana form the central romantic pairing of the novel. Within this new relationship, both characters retain their feminine characteristics. This means that Peters’ depiction of their relationship reflects a femme/femme dynamic, a considerable shift in the construction of the central romantic relationship in Peters’ lesbian YA romance novels.

Overall, each of the characters, whether they are a butch character (Mike, Finn, Cece, and Swanee) or a femme character (Alyssa, Holland, Alix, and Liana), offer young adult readers multiple opportunities to relate to different ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15) as a lesbian in the world, real or fictional. As such a dominant voice for the representations of lesbian characters in YA literature in the 2000s and 2010s, it is important and relevant that Peters provided a range of gendered presentations and relationships for her readership. Some may view the butch/femme dynamic in lesbian YA romance novels as out-dated or restrictive, but those relationship constructions do exist and they are a valid way of being in the world. Despite the melodramatic style of her YA novels, Peters, like Packer and Bannon novels in the mid-twentieth-century, was attempting ‘to be honest *between the covers*’ (Bannon ‘Foreword’ 15) through her narratives—to depict a range of lesbian characters and to be candid about the realities of coming out. This honesty, combined with her desire to reach out to her intended young adult audience, is reflected in the publisher’s production of the peritextual elements of her YA novels. The following final section will compare the cover art and additional features of lesbian pulp fiction novels with

Peters' YA novels in order to illustrate how, with contrasting approaches, the peritexts of both sets of books speak to a dual audience.

### **Peritexts: Packaging Lesbian Love Stories for Dual Audiences**

The peritextual elements of any book amount to a series of 'beginnings' for the reader. These elements are opportunities for reader identification and interpretation from the moment the reader sees the book to opening its pages to reading the first line of the narrative. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue that the use and design of peritexts, which include a range of elements such as 'titles, subtitles, dedications, epigraphs, introductions, "notices" and so on', is 'one of the ways in which a literary text multiplies its beginnings' (5). Peritexts engage the reader with the book, but certain elements can also provide information about who the publishers have decided is the intended readership for a given book or edition. Sometimes, the intended readerships for the publisher and the author differ, producing mixed messages for the reader. This was the case with lesbian pulp fiction novels, as two disparate groups of readers were addressed simultaneously: heterosexual readers (the original intended audience for the novels) and lesbians (who inferred that the novels' themes related to their relationship experiences). In contrast, the peritextual elements of Peters' novels invite two complimentary sets of readers: young adult readers and the adult 'gatekeepers' who seek out books for young adult readers, such as librarians, teachers, parents, and guardians. All of these elements will then feedback into the reader's expectations for the genre. The cover for a novel is the most predominant peritextual element for the reader, and the cover art for some types of generic fiction have become clichés of their own. For example, the cover art for the lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1950s and 1960s are iconic for their erotic covers and their images have been reproduced in various





Figure 3: *Spring Fire* (1952) by Vin Packer (Zimet 46)

media, from cigarette cases to themed Twitter accounts, such as @LesbianPulpBot (Nyberg). Consistent peritextual design across an author's oeuvre can also enable the reader to quickly find and access their books. Publishers of YA literature, in particular, are known to publish subsequent editions of an author's books with new cover designs once the author has reached a certain level of notoriety (examples include David Levithan in the US and Cat Clarke in the UK). Overall, some peritextual elements, such as the cover art, cover copy,

and reviews are in the control of the publisher whilst other elements, such as the dedication, epigraphs, and 'notices', are in the control of the author; all of it is up for interpretation by the reader.

While pulp imprints like Gold Medal Books did not want to be seen to be making 'homosexuality attractive' (Packer vi) with their lesbian pulp novels (for fear of the censors and, more importantly, financial loss), they did want to make the covers attractive to as many consumers as possible. Packer recalls her editor's intention to 'jazz up the title and wrap [*Spring Fire*] in a sexy cover', regardless of what Packer wanted for the book's peritextual elements, because such a cover would be a smart 'business' decision (vii). As the publishers did not yet believe there to be a lesbian readership to which the books might be marketed, the covers were particular meant to entice the heterosexual male readership by portraying lesbian relationships as a sexual fantasy. Zimet writes that pulp fiction novels 'with lesbian content were often, but not always, conspicuous. Sometimes the title or tagline was enough, but often one just had to look for the two women on the cover, with at least one of them looking dreamily at the other' (22). The images often featured 'curvaceous women, scantily clad' in 'titillating poses

[that] teased the male libido' with ' [an] overt sexuality [that] dripped off the cover' (22). For example, the original cover for Torr  s' *Women's Barracks* depicts a women's changing room: three of the four women in full view are wearing lingerie and the two women in the foreground are exchanging seductive glances. For the original cover of Packer's *Spring Fire*, the image is similar: two young women are seated on a bed in satin slips, staring off into the distance in opposite directions; the smouldering blonde on the left sits upright in her



Figure 4: *Odd Girl Out* (1960) by Ann Bannon (Zimet 47)

black slip while the demure brunette on the right is in a pink slip, gently holding herself. Forrest's description of her experience of seeing *Odd Girl Out* as a teenager focuses on the cover design: 'I did not need to look at the title for clues; the cover leaped out at me from the drugstore rack: a young woman with sensuous intent on her face seated on a bed, leaning over a prone woman, her hands on the other woman's shoulders' (ix). Like the covers for Torr  s' and Packer's novels, the implied intimacy of the two women on the cover of Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* was obvious, but the cover was not necessarily intended for readers like Forrest.

Lesbian readers quickly learned to read the peritextual information of the pulp covers—two women in an intimate pose, something 'odd' about one or more of the women, a reference to a confession or honesty—in order to identify which novels were written for them. Bannon and Packer had no control over the cover, title, or other peritextual elements of their novels and recall being shocked by how contrary the editorial decisions were compared to the fictional characters and relationships they had created for their sought-after lesbian readership. Bannon notes that the covers were 'clearly intended to appeal to the large male readership, and not to the lesbian

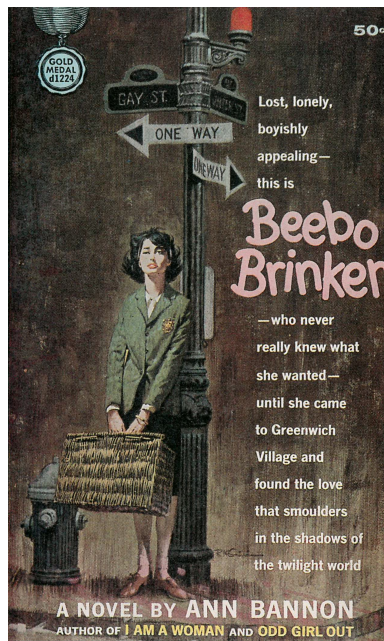


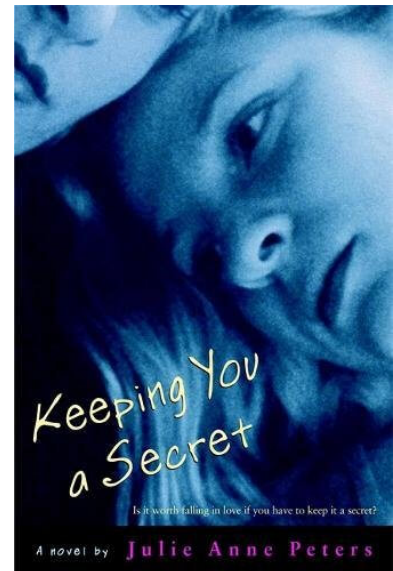
Figure 5: *Beebo Brinker* (1962) by Ann Bannon (Zimet 55)

constituency that we women writers, at least, thought we were reaching out to' ('Foreword' 9). The narratives of Packer and Bannon's work are sincere in the emotions portrayed in the relationships; at the same time, the publishers played on the public's desire for salacious topics through the subtitles for the lesbian pulp fiction novels, promising to reveal the 'truth' of covert lesbian affairs. The subtitle to *Spring Fire* reads: 'A story once told in whispers now frankly, honestly written' (1952).

Published five years later, Bannon's *Odd Girl Out*

references this subtitle within its own: 'A confession of love—as shocking—and as honest—as *Spring Fire*' (1957). This honesty was not for the benefit of potential lesbian readers—although many may have learned to read it as such—but rather heightened the scandalous interpretation of the novels for heterosexual readers titillated by homosexual fantasies. The subtitle of *Beebo Brinker* attempts to give a similar impression by contrasting the naivety of the young protagonist Beebo—'who never really knew what she wanted'—with the illicit idea that her arrival in Greenwich Village leads her to 'the love that smoulders in the shadow of the twilight world' (1962), even if the cover art is less sensationalistic. Forrest observes that this contradictory style was common throughout lesbian pulp fiction peritexts, arguing that there seemed to be 'an inverse law [...] at work on pulp fiction novels: the better and more honest the book, the more its jacket copy must moralize against it. For lesbian readers, mixed messages indeed' (xvi). Notwithstanding these mixed messages, Packer and Bannon's novels did illustrate lesbian relationships for a mass market and intimacy, secrecy, and romance thus became clichéd tropes of the lesbian pulp fiction peritextual elements intended to draw readers in.

The peritexts of Peters' YA novels draw on these generic clichés, but translate them to attract a young adult lesbian readership. For example, while *Spring Fire* and *Odd Girl Out* promise an 'honest' story that makes secrecy salacious, the cover of Peters' *Keeping You a Secret* invites an emotionally raw response from its readers as the subtitle asks 'Is it worth falling in love if you have to keep it a secret?'. First, the subtitle operates on the premise that lesbian relationships remain



**Figure 6:** *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) by Julie Anne Peters

inextricable from secrecy, reproducing a sense of a taboo relationship because the relationship is between two female characters. Second, the subtitle also earnestly invites the potential reader to respond to the premise of the novel as well as consider their own emotional response and action to the hypothetical scenario. The cover art—of two young women in an intimate pose—provides additional material to interpret the question in the subtitle. In the original black and white cover of *Keeping You a Secret*, one girl has nuzzled her head into the other girl's neck and has a dreamy expression on her face; from her body position and the angle of the photograph, the other girl appears to be seated, only her lips are in view, and she has rested her cheek on the girl's forehead. In a later colour version of the cover, two teenage girls are lying in the sunshine wearing feminine cotton camisole tops with flowers and brocade trim. Similar to the black and white cover art, only part of one of the girls' heads is visible in the photograph and she is turned towards the other, as if she might kiss her shoulder, while the full length of their upper arms are tightly pressed together. These two cover versions of *Keeping You a Secret*, in relation to the title and subtitle, echo the tropes discussed in lesbian pulp fiction covers in their portrayal of an intimate moment between two young women. The cover art and subtitles are not intended to communicate a sexual fantasy to



Figure 7: *Keeping You a Secret* (2007) by Julie Anne Peters

the reader, but they do invite the reader to witness an intimate moment between the two girls as well as to relate to the common scenario as an emotional incentive to purchase or begin reading the book.

In addition, Peters' novels have been designed to be recognisable for their portrayal of romantic intimacy by the young adult lesbian reader, particularly those edited by Megan Tingley and published by her main publisher, Little, Brown and Company. While Peters'

novels are not a series and there are no recurring characters or settings, the publisher has purposefully and visually defined the paperback editions of her work with repeated peritextual elements, from an early stage in her career. The cover art for each book is a photograph—in black and white or colour, depending on the paperback edition—and often depicts one or two young women, in relaxed positions or with overlapping body parts, who are dressed in casual clothing (e.g. t-shirts, camisole tops, jeans). The titles of Peters' YA novels are melodramatic and commonly include references to love, relationships, a female character, or a combination of these themes. The subtitles further pique the interest of the potential reader and foreshadow the drama of the enclosed narrative. For example, the subtitle for *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* is juxtaposed with the subtitle 'Sometimes you have to lose everything to find yourself' in order to create dramatic tension. For *Pretend You Love Me*, the subtitle signals to the reader the potential for unrequited love with the question, 'What if the one you love can't love you back?'. In addition to the title, subtitle, and cover art, the publisher has included further details on the front cover about Peters, including her name and the accolade 'National Book Award Finalist'. The majority of these elements are then reproduced on the spines of the paperback editions in identical format, font, and colour





Figure 8: *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011) by Julie Anne Peters

palette (including author name, inset of the cover art, title, and publisher details), reinforcing the themes of the books, even if the reader does not see the cover at first, and making for quick identification of the Peters' novels on a bookshelf. Where lesbian pulp fiction novels depended on making the lesbian content sexually exciting for potential readers through voyeuristic imagery, Peters' novels are marketed to solicit an emotional, rather than a sexual, response that is partially

determined by age. The titles and subtitles encourage the reader to relate to the proposed scenario, via experiential resonance—the assumption being that the reader will have experienced longing, love, desire or loss in their teenage life—and the cover art portrays intimacy and affection, rather than overtly sexual images. Together, these peritextual elements of the front cover and spine allow younger teen readers (ages 13-15) to be able to emotionally associate with the book covers as well as older teen readers (ages 16-19) that may have had (more) romantic and/or sexual experiences.

While the design of the front cover is largely aimed at an implied young adult readership, the back cover implies an adult readership as well—particularly, librarians, teachers, and adults who may provide access to books for young adult readers. The back cover is split into three main sections: 'For Anyone' with excerpt from the novel, 'Rave Reviews', and an author biographical information section. The 'For Anyone' section header has an enticing tagline that echoes the subtitle on the front cover, for example: 'For anyone who has ever wanted to leave the past behind' (*She Loves You, She Loves You Not...*) and 'For anyone who has ever wanted to be more than just friends' (*Pretend You Love Me*). Intended for a wider audience, the tagline is an opportunity to open a dialogue in regard to sexuality, whomever 'anyone' might be, especially in the case of a

reader who may not (yet) identify as non-heteronormative. The format also reinforces the specific theme of each novel and provides visual continuity across the back covers of Peters' novels. Similar to the titles and subtitles, the excerpts on the back cover allude to the lesbian content of the novels, but do not explicitly define the central romantic relationship of the novels. The excerpt from the novel then allows potential readers to engage with each novel's theme and decide whether



Figure 9: *Pretend You Love Me* (2011) by Julie Anne Peters

or not it grabs their attention. Scanning down the back cover, the 'Rave Reviews' section provides reviews from professional journals, such as *Kirkus Reviews*, *The Bulletin*, *VOYA*, and *School Library Journal*, that are included to specifically invite an adult readership who may also have a vested interest in what young adults read. The reviews tend to be more straightforward about the lesbian content in the novels and imply that the novels could be 'informative' or 'educational' for the young adult reader. For instance, the *Kirkus* review for *Keeping You a Secret* reads: 'Holland's experiences will inform readers who are also discovering their sexual identity. Gay or straight, they'll identify with the excitement that accompanies that first love affair' (*Kirkus*). The 'readers' in *Kirkus*' review are young adult readers who are questioning their sexuality and sexual identity but the review is for the educational adult readership (and purchasers). This differs not only from lesbian pulp fiction novels, which often did not have any reviews included in the peritexts, but also from YA novels by Peters' contemporaries. For example, Malinda Lo's debut novel *Ash* (2009) (to be discussed in Chapter Three), features three reviews on the back cover from previously established young adult authors: Peters, for her YA novels about LGBTQ characters; Cassandra Clare, author of the fantasy series *The Mortal Instruments* (2007-2014); and Meg Cabot,

author of the epistolary *Princess Diaries* series (2000-2015). Including reviews from authors writing in thematically related genres generally implies a desire to engage a young adult readership with a range of narrative interests. In contrast, Peters' peritextual elements situate her work in two ways: first, as a narrative of intimacy and drama with lesbian themes for young adult readers and, second, as a safe and informative novel for adults to provide for teenagers who may be exploring their sexuality. Whether sensationalistic or educational, the peritextual elements of the lesbian pulp fiction novels of the twentieth century and Peters' YA novels of the twenty-first century provided visual and verbal codes for the reader to find themselves in 'between the pages' (Packer ix).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, lesbian pulp fiction provided lesbian readers with fictional representations of 'ways of being and behaving' (Betz 15) that had never before been so easily accessible and affordable in print in the US. The few lesbian authors who wrote for an intended lesbian audience, like Packer and Bannon, aspired to tell their stories honestly—and they were rewarded with correspondences from readers whose lives were changed by the pulp fiction novels they found. While those authors could not provide the satisfaction of a 'happy ending', as enjoyed by romance readers, they committed to providing representation for their lesbian readers. Like Packer and Bannon, Peters was dedicated, as a lesbian author, to writing for an intended lesbian readership. To them, she writes, 'Readers, from my heart to yours: May you find the happiness you seek, the peace and joy and comfort of community. May you be safe and secure and strong. Be proud of who you are. Be visible so you can see each other, find each other, show the world our humanity. Be true to yourself and those you love'



(*Keeping You a Secret* 252). Her YA novels utilise the key narrative elements of lesbian YA romance novels whilst reminding her reader of the potential consequences of coming out as well as reproducing gendered characterisations of lesbians for a young adult audience. A benefit of Peters' reproduction of the butch/femme dynamic in her fictional romantic relationships is the inclusion of some of the few butch characters in LGBTQ YA literature—although hopefully that trend will change in order to increase the representations of a variety of gender presentations for lesbian, bisexual, or queer female characters.

The following chapter is the second case study of the thesis and focuses on the fantasy and science fiction YA novels by Malinda Lo. Her novels collectively represent a broadening spectrum of lesbian and bisexual characters and their romantic relationships in YA literature, and reflect Lo's intention to increase gender, sexual, and racial diversity in narratives for a young adult readership. Like Peters' novels, Lo reproduces the narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance novel, but her narratives more greatly reflect participation in the respective generic conventions of fantasy and science fiction, a blending of genres that produces lesbian love stories alongside adventure.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Constructing Identities in Alternate Realities:**

#### **Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Malinda Lo's Young Adult Novels**

In the previous two chapters, I have outlined how lesbian young adult (YA) romance novels participate in the genres of romance and discussed, through the lens of a case study, how the work of Julie Anne Peters echoes tropes from mid-century lesbian pulp fiction in her depictions of coming out and characterisations of lesbians. Peters' YA novels and those discussed in Chapter One rely on the use of a contemporary, realistic mode and, in turn, offer a facsimile of reality, for better or worse. In the creation of these everyday worlds, the main actors, settings, and issues of interpersonal conflict are often already familiar to the reader. Categories such as 'lesbian' and 'bisexual or 'high school' and 'summer camp' already exist and their inclusion in the story comes with a set of connotations and expectations for the narrative. The genres of fantasy and science fiction used in the YA novels to be discussed in this chapter, however, rely more overtly on generic codes and conventions that readers acquire as they become familiar with the genres, authors, or particular novels wherein old words take on new meanings, or the 'otherness' of outer space brings recognisable issues into focus. The explanation, or lack thereof, of such new concepts or societies is integral to building a new fictional world—from creating the tenuous barrier between humans and fairies in a dynastic fantasy to illustrating the chaos of a near-future San Francisco visited by aliens. Farah Mendlesohn suggests that 'all literature builds worlds, but some genres are more honest about it than others' (59). The worldbuilding of science fiction and fantasy is more visible because it offers the reader an alternate reality to their own.

This chapter approaches a second single-author case study of lesbian love stories by examining how the work of Malinda Lo participates in the genres of speculative

fiction and romance through her construction of non-heteronormative identities in alternative realities. Like Peters, Lo is a significant author in the field of LGBTQ YA literature who has consistently published narratives with lesbian *and* female bisexual protagonists, depicting their romantic relationships through a blend of generic narrative conventions. She has also been vocal in communicating her vision for increased gender, sexual, and racial diversity in YA narratives in forums and media that reach beyond the base of her readership. By focusing solely on Lo's work in this chapter, I intend to demonstrate how one author has developed her approach to generic codes and marginalised identities through successive novels as well as open a discussion about lesbian and bisexual protagonists, and their love stories, in fantasy and science fiction. The analysis builds on the previous chapters by illustrating how Lo's narratives expand the possibilities of representation, particularly with the depiction of a bisexual protagonist, and even when the execution of some of the related characters or relationships might become weighted with didacticism and caution. Her authorial intention to push the boundaries of lesbian love stories in YA literature can be viewed as setting an example for what would follow in the 2010s, to be discussed in subsequent chapters. To illustrate these points, I will examine four of Lo's YA novels, including two fantasy novels, *Ash* (2009) and *Huntress* (2011), and two science fiction novels, *Adaptation* (2012) and its sequel *Inheritance* (2013). (Lo has also published a companion novella to the science fiction duology entitled *Natural Selection* (2013) as an e-book, but as it takes place before the main narrative of the duology and only focuses on one of the secondary characters, I have chosen not to analyse the text.) This chapter will first briefly summarise how Lo's work relates to other YA science fiction and fantasy novels, with particular attention to how Lo's novels display her intention to portray diverse characters and relationships in her narratives for young adult readers. Then, I will situate *Ash* and *Huntress* in relation to the generic conventions of fantasy

before analysing how Lo codes sexual identity and same-sex desires in her fantasy novels. The final section will outline and examine how Lo utilises generic tropes from science fiction to portray non-heteronormative identities and relationship structures in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*. In my close readings of the texts throughout the latter two sections, I will refer to the three key narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance novel in order to continue to demonstrate how these narrative events of the lesbian YA romance novel are shaped by the blending with other genres.

### **Writing with Diversity: Inclusion, Didacticism, and Genre**

Since 2009, when Lo published her first YA novel *Ash*, a lesbian retelling of ‘Cinderella’, she has publically reflected on the importance, for herself, of writing that particular love story. In a collection of letters by LGBTQ YA authors to their younger selves published as *The Letter Q* (2012) edited by Sarah Moon and James Lecesne, Lo reminds sixteen-year-old Malinda of her childhood love for the fairy tale of ‘Cinderella’. Lo recalls that her dad would play the 1950 Disney soundtrack to the film every morning and ‘strains of “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes” would tremble down the hallway of the house’ (Lo *The Letter Q* 87). As a result, she ‘would wake up imagining ballrooms and billowing gowns and Prince Charming,’ reflecting that it was ‘a lovely dream: to have a fairy-tale romance’ (87). Lo expresses that at that time in her life she yearned to be loved, but that she was also scared of love. She closes the letter by reassuring her younger self that ‘[a] day will come when your fear will crumble [... and] your dreams will come true, but you’re not going to marry a prince’ (88). Lo writes on her website that she understands that ‘Cinderella’ as a story is viewed by some as ‘anti-feminist’, but that she took an empowering and hopeful message from the tale because, for her, ‘Cinderella was a fantasy about surviving something horrible and finding love

at the end of it. When you're in a dark place, you need those kinds of fantasies' ('ASH...thoughts on Cinderella'). She repeatedly emphasises that her motivation to write *Ash* stems from this childhood interpretation of the fairy tale, stating 'I wrote this book for myself. It was the story I needed to tell myself when I needed the courage to be myself' ('Is Ash lesbian or bisexual?'). As a Chinese American author who also identifies as a lesbian, part of the need to tell her own version of 'Cinderella' was to see herself represented in fiction. In addition to writing female love interests, Lo has written that the characters in *Ash* have 'Asian features' in her imagination, but that they are not Asian because 'there is no Asia in Ash's world', even if details of the narrative derive certain elements from 'very distant ties to Chinese cultural tradition' ('Asianness'). Whether or not readers understand this loose connection, though, is not a concern for Lo; *Ash* filled a personal gap for the author, and the novel provides readers with the opportunity to immerse themselves in a sexually (and racially) diverse retelling of 'Cinderella'.

Lo has continued and intensified her focus on depicting sexual, racial, and gender diversity in her narratives as her subsequent protagonists and secondary characters are portrayed with increasingly complex identity categories, highlighting her intersectional approach to character construction. (My understanding of intersectionality is based on the work of Kimberly Crenshaw as proposed in her article 'Mapping the Margins' (1991) as a methodology to 'disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive and separable' (1244, footnote 9), to which I also add the identity category of sexuality.) For example, *Huntress*, her second novel and a prequel to *Ash*, is another lesbian love story and the narrative offers more direct references for the reader to recognise that it is an Asian-inspired fantasy, rather than a European-inspired fantasy. Such details range from the peritextual elements chosen by the publisher (such as the depiction of an Asian female character in the cover art) to the practices and beliefs

discussed and demonstrated by the characters in the narrative itself. Lo writes that she ‘wanted to create a world that was philosophically and spiritually rooted’ in Chinese and Japanese traditions, which includes ‘Taoism, qigong, Chinese medicine, divination, and kyudo [the Japanese martial art of archery]’ (‘On avoiding the exotic’ in “Huntress”). As I will explore shortly, Lo’s science fiction duology, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, also includes a racially diverse cast of characters with a variety of sexualities and gender identities. Furthermore, her most recent novel *A Line in the Dark* (2017) features a Chinese American queer female protagonist and two additional queer female characters (according to publicity materials (Hogan ‘EXCLUSIVE’) and advanced reader reviews (Lambert ‘Pride and Less Prejudice’)). Lo’s writing is driven by a politically conscious process, both implicitly and didactically communicated to varying degrees, that aims to shift the field of YA literature away from its reliance on portraying characters that are predominantly white, heterosexual, and cisgender. Outside of her fiction, Lo has been active, particularly online, in the discussion about diversity and inclusivity in YA literature, one outcome of which has been the creation of Diversity in YA (DiYA) with fellow Chinese American author Cindy Pon, which began as a book tour in 2011. The project has continued through the DiYA website, which aims to ‘celebrate young adult books about all kinds of diversity, from race to sexual orientation to gender identity and disability. [Their] goal is to bring attention to books and authors that might fall outside the mainstream, and to bring the margin to the center’ (Lo and Pon, emphasis mine). The website promotes and analyses diverse YA novels and discusses publishing trends within the US. The intention of Lo and Pon ‘to bring the margin to the center’ is most effectively done through the writing of literature itself, by authors placing marginalised characters at the centre of their own stories with a varied cast of characters and settings with which to interact.

As referenced in Chapter One, the majority of protagonists and love interests in lesbian YA romance novels are white, and so one example of Lo's commitment to representing marginalised identities in her YA novels is her inclusion of a racially diverse cast of characters in *Adaptation*. The setting of San Francisco readily lends itself to the portrayal of a diverse community because the city is nationally and internationally known as a liberal, open-minded place with a history of racial and sexual diversity. The 2014 United States Census Bureau indicates that San Francisco has a more racially mixed demographic than the State of California average. In particular, the population identifying as 'White' in San Francisco is one-fifth less than the State of California average (53.8% vs 73.2%) while the population identifying as 'Asian' is one-fifth more than the state average (34.9% vs 14.4%) ('QuickFacts'). In *Adaptation*, protagonist Reese Holloway is described as white and living in a single-parent household with her mom, while her best friend Julian Arens is half African American and half Jewish (and gay). Love interest David Li is Chinese American and his mom, dad, and sister also feature in the narrative. The text additionally provides subtle information about the racial and ethnic heritage for tertiary characters in *Adaptation*. In a brief flashback scene that primarily functions to illustrate Reese's disinterest in romantic relationships, Lo references Reese's diverse community of friends through the inclusion of their non-Anglo surnames. These names include [origins of the surnames indicated in brackets]: Tyler and Madison Pon [Chinese or South East Asian], Briana 'Bri' Martinez [Latino or Hispanic], Robbie Revilla [Spanish or Filipino], Eli Campbell [Irish or Scottish], Stephanie Chen [Chinese], and Eric Chung [Chinese or Korean] (*Adaptation* 149-152). Personal details like surnames are not routinely given in YA novels for tertiary characters and while the text does not clarify, for example, if Eric Chung is from a Chinese and/or Korean background, the predominant reading is that he is Asian, not white. (Even the surname Lo includes that has Celtic origins—Campbell—could make

reference to the historical, minority Irish community in San Francisco, however unlikely.) In this scene, Lo takes the opportunity to deploy a simple tactic for the incidental inclusion of racial diversity that reflects the real life diversity of the novels' geographical, yet near-future setting. This strategy implicitly communicates that non-white characters have an equally valid place in science fiction narratives as well as offer readers of *all* races and ethnicities the opportunity to relate to characters that may represent or differ from their individual racial and ethnic identities or communities.

In terms of sexual diversity, Lo has emerged as one of the main YA authors writing lesbian and female bisexual *protagonists* in fantasy and science fiction novels. For young adult readers, the protagonists of speculative fiction have been predominantly portrayed as heterosexual; when LGBTQ characters have been included they have been mainly portrayed as gay or male bisexual *secondary* characters. For example, during the same period of Lo's publications, there has been an increased visibility of gay and bisexual male secondary characters in YA fantasy novels, which have included highly successful series such as Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007-2014), Sarah Rees Brennan's *Demon's Lexicon* trilogy (2009-2011), and Holly Black's *The Darkest Part of the Forest* (2015). There have only been a few other YA fantasy novels with lesbian or bisexual protagonists published in the US in that time: Kristopher Reisz's urban fantasy *Tripping to Somewhere* (2006), Audrey Coulthurst's high fantasy *Of Fire and Stars* (2016), and Julia Ember's high fantasy *Unicorn Tracks* (2016) and *The Seafarer's Kiss* (2017), a fairy tale retelling of 'The Little Mermaid'. The majority of these novels were published after Lo's fantasy novels and in the final years of my research, but there does appear to be the possibility of a building momentum towards publishing more fantasy YA novels with lesbian and bisexual female protagonists. (Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997), a young adult collection of fairy tales retellings, also features same-sex relationships between



female characters in a few of the short stories, but overall the collection operates more similarly to feminist retellings of fairy tales than YA fantasy fiction.) Science fiction YA novels with lesbian or female bisexual protagonists have been fewer in numbers than fantasy, with the only comparable titles to Lo's duology being published outside the US: *Big Big Sky* (2008) by Kristyn Dunnion (Canada), a dystopian YA novel, and *Replica* (2014) by Jack Heath (UK), a novel set in the near-future featuring robot clones. Other notable YA novels with LGBTQ *protagonists* include intersex protagonist Micah Grey in Laura Lam's fantasy novels *Pantomime* (2013), *Shadowplay* (2014), and *Masquerade* (2017), bisexual male protagonist Austin Szerba in Andrew Smith's science fiction novel *Grasshopper Jungle* (2014), and transgender protagonist Sam in Anna-Marie McLemore's fantasy novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016). Overall, in the history of lesbian YA romance novels thus far, Lo has been a trend-setting figure in telling lesbian love stories in speculative YA literature.

Lo's same-sex romances very much engage in 'genre bending and blending' (Cart 95) as she draws on generic conventions from fantasy, science fiction, romance, and realism to construct her narratives. In terms of the character development, the love stories are built into the action of the narrative (instead of its central focus), so that the non-heteronormative identity of the protagonists are a *feature* of their character rather than the function of their character within the narrative or the conflict of the narrative itself. This approach supports the drive to create characters that just 'happen' to identify as LGBTQ, a progressive move in storytelling for a YA audience. How Lo executes this generic-blending strategy is the focus of the next two sections. First, I will examine her fantasy novels, *Ash* and *Huntress*, by briefly discussing theories of fantasy literature, situating those definitions in relation to Lo's work, and analysing how Lo codes non-heteronormative identities and same-sex desires in the building of her fantasy world. Second, I will consider her science fiction duology, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, by

signalling how her work engages with generic conventions of science fiction, evaluating how bisexuality operates as a theme within the novels, and demonstrating how Lo combines science fiction tropes with key narrative elements from lesbian YA romance to construct the central romantic relationship of the narrative.

### **Building in Codes: Fantasy and Same-Sex Desire**

Lo refers to *Ash* and *Huntress* as ‘fantasy novels’ and works of ‘speculative fiction’ and occasionally gestures towards their separate literary traditions of ‘fairy tale’ (*Ash*) and ‘high fantasy’ (*Huntress*) (‘The Lesbian Question’). All of these categorisations can be applied to her work, but I want to consider how else her novels might be situated within literary criticism about fantasy, as a mode and a genre. Rosemary Jackson’s critical theory of fantasy as a mode privileges the social context of a novel’s production in the interpretation of the narrative. She contends that while a fantasy novel ‘might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it’ (3). Understanding the social context of the novel’s production is important because, Jackson states, ‘fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural restraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss’ (3). As referenced at the beginning of this chapter, Lo wrote *Ash*, and its prequel, because she desired to see her identities and relationships represented on the page and found the literature available to her to be lacking. Her choice to write those narratives within mode of fantasy supports Jackson’s argument that the ‘fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made “absent”’ (4). Lo’s narrative makes same-sex desires and relationships visible within a

fantasy world and, in doing so, fills an absence for the young adult reader in the real world.

Mendlesohn's categories of the genre of fantasy are a useful tool to draw out some of the generic conventions at play in Lo's narratives. Determined by how 'the fantastic enters the narrative world' (xvi), Mendlesohn proposes that there are four categories of fantasy: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. These categories are not offered as a strict taxonomy, but rather as a means to 'consider the genre in ways that open up new questions' (xvi). Lo's fantasy novels, *Ash* and *Huntress*, are immersive fantasies. Mendlesohn argues that the immersive fantasy 'invites us to share not merely a world, but a set of assumptions. At its best, it presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and the reader' (xx). *Ash* and *Huntress* are set in the same, unnamed world, but centuries apart; in their world's history *Huntress* comes first chronologically, but there are key roles, such as the huntress, that appear in both narratives. Part of the set of assumptions for this fantasy world is that same-sex desire and relationships are normalised, if infrequent. Lo states that *Ash* is 'set in an alternate world where there is no word to describe same-sex relationships, because they are not considered abnormal' and that the love between Ash and Kaisa is not "'gay love"'; it is love' (Lo 'The Lesbian Question'). As a result of this narrative assumption, neither female character nor their relationship is labelled as 'lesbian' or any other label<sup>16</sup> related to sexual or gender identity within the novels. The validation and normalisation of Ash and Kaisa's relationship is implicit in the narrative and sets a precedent for the understanding of the central romantic relationship in *Huntress*. The coding of desire and the trajectory of the love story is also different from the lesbian YA romance novels examined thus far because Lo's fantasy novels do not

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<sup>16</sup> Jon Michael Wargo claims that Ash is bisexual in the novel, claiming that she 'becomes obsessed' (45) Sidhean, a male fairy. I argue that Ash seeks out Sidhean in the first half of the novel out of loneliness, not love, and her desire to be reunited with her dead mother; therefore, Sidhean is not considered to be a valid love interest.

need to incorporate a revelation (coming out) scene that hinges on the acceptance of a non-heteronormative identity; rather, the revelation scenes are solely focused on the two female characters revealing their love for one another, a blending of the fantasy and romance genres.

In this shared fantasy world, Lo creates various masculine roles that are traditionally held by women and that are presented ‘without comment’ (Mendlesohn xx) to the reader. The introduction of the figure of the huntress is the key example of this technique in *Ash*. As a child getting to know her stepmother’s village, Ash is struck by the grandeur of the hunting party, but she is not surprised by the huntress ‘for hunts had always been led by women’, even in her own village (Lo *Ash* 47). As Mendlesohn writes, ‘[a] popular tactic [to achieve a sense of depth in an immersive fantasy] is through the creation of a vocabulary that claims meaning but reveals itself, if at all, only through context, which builds the sense of story and world behind what we actually see’ (83). While Lo does not create new vocabulary, per se, she does give world-specific meaning to previously known vocabulary in her establishment of the role of the huntress. Lo presents these scant details of the huntress’s role as if it is standard for a woman to lead a group of hunters each year, whether for a local village or on behalf of the King, normalising it within Ash’s world. However, Lo does portray the women who occupy the position of the huntress as somehow different to Ash. This ‘difference’ is communicated through codes, a sense of knowing and recognition as experienced by Ash and understood by the implied reader. The coded language begins with what Ash sees as she is ‘transfixed by the sight of [the hunting party]. The women, especially, with their casual camaraderie and easy grace, seemed like entirely different creatures than her stepmother and stepsisters’ (Lo *Ash* 47-48). Ash specifically contrasts the huntress with her stepmother and stepsisters, women with whom she already feels distant (as opposed to women generally), and the simile works to align Ash with the

huntress instead of the women within her family unit. Ash then meets a huntress, Taryn, for the first time at her stepmother's Yule party. When Taryn notices Ash, when no other guest has, Ash feels 'as though the huntress had suddenly called her into being' (50-51). There are three things to note about how this narrative moment is coded. First, the huntress's singular notice of Ash marks *both* Ash and the huntress as different from the rest of the guests. Second, their recognition is, initially, communicated through a visual greeting rather than an exchange of words, which I will explore in more detail shortly. Finally, Ash attempts to make sense of this moment by acknowledging that the huntress had 'called her into being', as if she were not fully herself before this recognition. Lo portrays a sense of kinship between Ash and the huntress through this knowing and coming into being, setting them apart from the other partygoers. While Ash does not yet comprehend the subtleties of her observations, readers looking for coded clues can begin to put pieces together: the huntress is a role not typically held by most women, Ash notices them and they notice her, therefore Ash may also be different.

In this scene, Lo allows the visual—what Ash sees and who sees her—to take precedence. This is another tactic used in immersive fantasies where 'what is not said is as important as what is' (Mendlesohn 73). The slippage between visual and verbal confirmation supports the coded construction of Lo's characters—a prioritisation that encourages her readers to privilege what is seen over what is said, to read between the lines. Like the opening scene of Peters' *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) that partly relies on a comprehension of the gay codes on the love interest's t-shirt as discussed in the previous chapter, Ash must first learn to recognise the relevant visual clues and coded language before she can begin to understand herself and her attractions. When Ash sits down with Taryn and her hunting party, she judges by 'looking at the huntress' that it is possible for her to confirm Ash's fairy sightings in the Wood (Lo *Ash* 56). Taryn has just told Ash a fairy tale so one could argue that the telling has provoked Ash to ask

about the Fairy World, and yet the text emphasises Ash's visual appraisal of the huntress as that which matters. The huntress responds with an obscuring answer, first denying that she has seen a fairy and then confessing that, of what she has seen, she '*cannot say* if those things were fairies' (56, emphasis mine). Implied in Taryn's response is the valuation of Ash's experience—of seeing a fairy—over what may be allowable in speech. If Ash speaks of the Fairy World, she may be accused of clinging to the 'old ways' by those around her; if Taryn confirms the existence of fairies she may be breaking a code of conduct as huntress. Many years after Ash met Taryn briefly at the Yule party, Kaisa comments on Taryn's omission in a conversation with Ash about the existence of fairies, stating that '[the] office of the King's Huntress has many secrets. [...] Any knowledge of fairies or magic, of course, must be kept closely to the vest' (164). In both instances, the huntress and Ash rely on each other to read between the lines, to not trust what is being said at face value. Where Ash was 'let down' by Taryn's response as a child, Kaisa's hint of magical knowledge causes a visceral response that both acknowledges Ash's belief in the Fairy World and her budding desire for Kaisa: 'Looking at the huntress, Ash felt a surge of happiness within herself, as if she were unwrapping an unexpected gift, and the realization of it sent a blush of pink across her cheeks' (164-165). Kaisa does not confirm the Fairy World any more than Taryn did, but in this exchange Ash is older and now understands the coded language; the omission becomes a shared intimacy between the two young women rather than a distancing puzzle. Throughout the novel, the Fairy World is a place considered to be 'other' where few humans seek and experience interactions. By coding the knowledge of fairies between the huntresses and Ash, Lo builds a connection of familiarity between them and offers a language for that which cannot be spoken about.

While homosexuality remains a political issue in the United States (US), in Lo's fantasy world same-sex love has always been an accepted part of that culture. To

illustrate this aspect of Ash's world for the real world readers, Lo employs the telling of fairy tales, within a fairy tale re-telling of 'Cinderella', to thread themes of sexuality and same-sex desire throughout the narrative. Overall, seven fairy tales are told, either narrated by one character to another or read by Ash from her book of fairy tales, one of her most prized possessions. At each point, the fairy tale functions to communicate that which cannot be said directly: to illustrate the bravery of a young woman against fairy magic ('Eilis and the Changeling' (52)), to grapple with Ash's curiosity with the Fairy World ('The Farmer and the Hunt' (26-29); 'Kathleen' (78-80); to determine if fairies are real ('Joining the Fairy Hunt' (84-88)), or to express same-sex desire ('Niamh' (152-156); 'The Stag Princess' (203-204); 'Elinor' (251-253)). Lo's creation of a world-specific folklore that includes multiple fairy tales of women falling in love with women suggests a larger tradition of same-sex relationships. The most evident example of Lo's use of this generic convention is Kaisa's recounting of the fairy tale of 'Niamh', one of the earliest huntresses, in an intimate setting to Ash (152-156). In this story, Niamh has fallen in love with the princess, but her love is unrequited. Desperate to gain the princess' affections, Niamh goes to the Fairy Queen in hopes that she will grant her wish of requited love. The Fairy Queen agrees on the condition that Niamh will stay with her for ten years as her huntress. At the end of her commitment, Niamh has fallen in love with the Fairy Queen instead and chooses to stay in the Fairy World. As Kaisa tells this story to Ash, two levels of narrative communication take place. On one level, Kaisa communicates her romantic desire for Ash through a narrator/narratee relationship. The story functions as a playful, romantic gift to Ash: it is Kaisa's favourite fairy tale and telling it privileges same-sex love as important to the huntress. It is later revealed that Kaisa learned the fairy tale from Taryn, who left the office of the King's Huntress because '[her] lover asked her to' (165). The implication is that Taryn's lover is a woman and the discussion causes Kaisa to blush—an intimate tell that

Ash notices ‘on the curl of her ear’ (165) that further develops the romance between the two young women. As the narratee to the fairy tale of ‘Niamh’, Ash flirtatiously responds to Kaisa’s story by withholding her ‘favourite’ fairy tale but stating that ‘perhaps one day [she] will tell it to [Kaisa]’ (156). On another level, the telling of the fairy tale of Niamh sets up a narrative transaction between the implied author and the implied reader. John Stephens argues that ‘narrative fictions have referential meaning and are constructed with the intent of shaping reader responses, and hence attitudes’ (48). The implied author seeks to normalise non-heteronormative relationships for the implied reader through the positive portrayal of same-sex love stories within a same-sex love story. Lo’s fictional fairy tale of ‘Niamh’ functions as a tactic to indicate that Ash and Kaisa’s relationship is acceptable within this fantasy world, normalising same-sex romantic relationships for the implied reader, too.

Lo further substantiates her normalised portrayal of same-sex desire through the narrative arc of Ash and Kaisa’s relationship as well as the narrative elements of the revelation, first kiss, and the resolution in *Ash*. While neither Ash nor Kaisa need to ‘come out’ in this fantasy world, Lo does need to demonstrate the attraction and desire between the two women of the central romantic couple. In the narrative, the possibility for a romantic relationship between Ash and Kaisa is largely constructed through brief moments of casual dialogue. For example, when the two women discuss the Prince’s impending engagement, Ash asks Kaisa if she has ever dreamed of being a princess. Kaisa replies that it depends ‘on whether [she] would have to marry a prince’ (Lo *Ash* 216), implying that she would only prefer to *be* a princess if she could also *marry* one. Like the revelation scene in *Everything Leads To You* (2015) by Nina LaCour discussed in Chapter One, this dialogue exchange constitutes a revelation between the love interest and the protagonist, insofar as Kaisa communicates to Ash that she desires women; however, Kaisa does not clarify in response to a presumed heterosexuality (as



is required between Emi and Ava), but rather responds to the context of the question (a reference to the Prince). Kaisa is also flirting with Ash: her tone is described as 'lighthearted' and inviting 'Ash to share her smile' (216). Kaisa follows on from this revelation by asking Ash if she will be at the upcoming ball, further implying her romantic interest for the protagonist. When Ash and Kaisa finally share their first kiss towards the end of the novel, the scene is portrayed as an awakening for Ash. The narrator explains that 'Ash felt her entire body move towards [Kaisa], as if every aspect of her being was reorienting itself to this woman, and they could not be close enough. [...] The knowledge of love had changed her. It focussed what had once been a blur; it turned her world around and presented her with a new landscape (277-278). While the kiss is filled with desire, the language is also reminiscent of first kiss scenes in lesbian YA romance novels where the moment is a catalyst for the protagonist's coming out. Lo incorporates this language for the implied reader who might relate experientially, but because same-sex desire is normalised within this fantasy world, Ash's response is not in regard to her sexual orientation. Rather, the first kiss gives Ash the key to her freedom: love. Through the first kiss, Ash's mind is cleared of Sidhean's presence, the male fairy to whom she is indebted, and she realises that her love for Kaisa will enable her to negotiate her debt to Sidhean *and* return to the woman she loves. When Ash is successful, the narrative delivers a 'happily ever after' resolution as the third person omniscient narrator informs the reader that Ash 'knew, at last, that she was home' (291).

In *Huntress*, Lo's narrative engages with the central love story on the first page of the novel, rather than waiting for the second half of the novel to bring it into focus. Through a description of Taisin's vision, the reader is introduced to the potential for a romantic relationship between Taisin and Kaede, the protagonist and the love interest, respectively: 'She saw a beach made of ice, and she felt her heart breaking. [...]

Someone there was climbing into a rowboat, and she knew that she loved this person. She was certain of it in the same way that one is instantly aware of the taste of sweetness in a drop of honey' (*Huntress* 1). When the vision ends, Taisin physically reacts to what she has seen as her body trembles and she notices sweat on her skin. She reflects positively on the successful clarity of her vision yet feels 'no satisfaction [because] she could not rejoice in the vision of someone she apparently loved departing on a journey to her death' (1). In this scene, the sensuality of the image is overt, but the same-sex desire is coded in the language of the romance genre with its saccharine metaphors, rather than being implied through the coded language of the fantastic, as it is in *Ash* with the references to the Fairy World. When the vision reveals that the rower of the boat is Kaede, her presence is puzzling because she and Taisin do not know each other well and the location is strange and unfamiliar. The information regarding Taisin's love for Kaede also complicates protagonist's reaction to the vision. This is not because the object of her affections is another young woman, but because she appears to have a romantic attachment at all: Taisin is training to be a sage, a role held only by women that includes the practices of clairvoyance and herbal medicine, but to be a sage, one must commit to a lifetime of celibacy. Like the role of the huntress in *Ash*, Lo imbues the concept of a sage with new meaning as part of her worldbuilding technique, once again deepening the reader's understanding of the society in which the characters lives. The role of a sage also provides narrative tension by creating a barrier to the central romantic relationship that pertains to relationships and sexuality but, unlike lesbian YA romance novels written in the mode of realism, is *not* dependent on the issue or acceptance of homosexuality. Lo thus uses the elements of the fantastic in her world to avoid the repetition of same-sex desire as 'an issue' in YA fiction whilst still providing a feasible barrier for the reader. Through the immediate introduction of the vision, the role of the sage, and the same-sex love story, 'the fantastic enters the narrative world'

(Mendlesohn xvi) swiftly in *Huntress* and the reader is immediately invited to share in the experience.

While the role of the sage in *Huntress* does not carry with it the same implicit characteristic of same-sex desire as the role of the Huntress in *Ash*, Lo again suggests a larger community of women with whom the central female characters can relate to in terms of gender and sexuality. In *Huntress*, the secondary character of Fin, Kaede's mentor and the Academy's female groundskeeper, is coded as butch in the narrative. As discussed in Chapter Two, butch characters have been historically signified in literature through the descriptions of their masculine appearance, body language, employment, male monikers, and independence. Fin is described as having a gruff voice, short grey hair, dirty oil-stained fingers, and the 'measured gait' (Lo *Huntress* 23) of a former soldier. She now works as the groundskeeper for the all-female Academy on a cloistered island, often working alone in her workshop. The professions sought by Fin are stereotypically masculine, her community is women-centred, and her independence is seen as a strength. Fin is also described as being 'as vigorous as ever' for her age of fifty, 'quizzical' (22), and someone from whom 'no secrets' are kept (23). Like Peter's character Finn in *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011), Fin has a conventionally male name, even as some may suggest that the singular 'n' indicates a female name ('Baby Names—Fin'). For the knowing reader, Fin codes as a butch character.

Furthermore, when Kaede is deemed too restless for her originally assigned library position, the Academy reassigns her to Fin who gives Kaede manual labour tasks and teaches her knife throwing. This aligns Kaede with Fin, and while Kaede's physical descriptions are not coded in the same masculine tone as Fin's, her body language, interests, and skill set are closer to her mentor's description than any other female character in the novel. In addition, Fin is the only other character in the text with whom Kaede discusses her same-sex desires. In a year's time in the novel, Kaede is expected

to agree to a political marriage arranged by her parents to a Lord, but she refuses. When Fin questions her reasoning, Kaede ‘pulls a face’ and replies, ‘Fin, I could never marry any man, you know that’ (Lo *Huntress* 26). Fin responds by saying that, even though it would be rare, there is the potential for a political marriage with another woman (26-27). This conversation, like the fairy tales in *Ash*, reminds the reader that same-sex relationships are valid in this fantasy world and offers another instance that deepens the bond between Kaede and her mentor. While this scene is the only conversation between the two characters, Fin’s presence permeates the novel as her teachings and gift of an iron dagger repeatedly save Kaede and members of her party’s lives on multiple occasions on their journey to the Fairy World. The inclusion of Fin creates a sense of a wider community, one that serves as a backdrop against which Taisin and Kaede’s characters and desires can be read as normalised.

The first kiss scene in *Huntress* is comparable to the scene in *Ash* as it functions as a confirmation of the romantic feelings between the protagonist and the love interest whilst Lo relies on the fantastic to build and substantiate the importance of the kiss. The premise for *Huntress* involves Taisin and Kaede travelling to Taninli, the royal city of the Fairy World, to meet the Fairy Queen and carry out a request on her behalf. The farther the two young women travel from their human world to the other world, the more the bond between them grows. Lo utilises the implicit powers of Taisin’s training to facilitate the building of their romantic relationship: each night, Taisin performs a ritual to weave a ‘circle of protection’ around the camp, lightly touching each her companions’ chests in the place over their hearts. Kaede begins to look forward to this moment each day and the narrator describes how ‘she felt the link between [her and Taisin] thickening, ripening: at first a slender shoot, and then a vine that curled around them, strengthening each day’ (176). Taisin is fearful to acknowledge this connection because of her vision and her calling as a sage, but she acknowledges that ‘the

connection between the two of them was different than what she felt with the others’ (176). The tension between Taisin and Kaede finally blossoms, though, when they reach Taninli on the night of Midsummer’s Eve. Lo reminds the reader that Midsummer’s Eve is ‘a night of great celebration’ (248) in the Fairy World, potentially invoking the intertextual reference to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (1605) for the reader as well. As their relationship has been building through the connection facilitated by a form of magic, it make sense that the culmination of those feelings would be experienced in the Fairy World on the evening when magic is at its most powerful.

By drawing on the fantastic, Lo heightens one of the novel’s key narrative elements—the first kiss—in two ways. First, the magical quality of Taninli and its annual celebrations frame the moment leading up to the first kiss: ‘Taisin stood beside her, looking down at the sea of celebrants. [...] Kaede could not stop staring at her, and she wondered if even the water in those pitchers was somehow thickened with magic, for nothing seemed usual tonight’ (253). Second, the first kiss is described by a single action: ‘Everything focused’ (254). Mainly, this brief explanation refers to Taisin’s experience of the kiss and the clarity she experiences as a result. The closer Taisin journeys to the Fairy World, the more the Fairy Queen’s daughter, the antagonist of the narrative, begins to dominate her subconscious; however, similar in function to Ash’s first kiss with Kaisa, the physical experience of the first kiss pushes everything else away as Taisin feels ‘all of her surging up to meet Kaede, who pressed her closer’ as they kiss (254). While the first kiss calls into question Taisin’s plan to become a sage once more, the two young women are not bound by their usual restrictions because they are in the Fairy World. When they make love the following night, Lo invokes Taisin’s powers from the circle of protection ritual with Kaede on their journey to Taninli by describing their intimate scene in botanical imagery: ‘Taisin felt as though there were a thousand purple flowers blooming inside her’ (278). The image can be read as an

orgasm, or an overwhelming burst of love, but the language also functions to connect Taisin and Kaede's love for one another in the human world with their new experiences in the Fairy World.

Of the four YA novels by Lo examined in this chapter, *Huntress* is the only novel to depict an ambiguous ending for the central romantic couple. After Kaede completes the tasks requested of her, she and Taisin return to Taninli before beginning their journey back to the human world. During this brief period, the two young women again have a reprieve from the restrictions and commitments of their future lives, as Chancellor's daughter betrothed to a Lord and as a sage in training. While it is implied that Kaede will change her fate by taking on the role of the King's Huntress following the agreement of a new treaty between the human world and the Fairy World, it appears less likely that Taisin will give up her dream of becoming a sage. As a result, once they leave the Fairy World, it is implied that the romantic aspect of their relationship will end permanently. Taisin is quick to remind Kaede that even if they cannot be together when they return, she wants only the best for her: "Let me say this. I'll always love you, but I make no claim on you. You aren't bound the way I'll be" (366). Kaede interrupts her, stating her love for Taisin and that "right now, that's all there is" (366). This scene successfully holds the tension between what may happen in the *future* for the two young women and what is possible *now*. Taisin playfully reminds Kaede that she is 'not a sage yet' (365) before they make love one more time. Readers of Lo's work may draw connections between other female characters in both fantasy novels who mirror Taisin's talents, but have chosen not to follow the path of a sage—Mona, a former sage, now lives as a greenwitch in *Huntress*; Ash's mother chose to discontinue her training in *Ash* to marry and have a child but still practiced the 'old ways'—holding out hope for the couple to be reunited after the end of the narrative. The implied resolution also allows for the reading of a 'together for now' approach that is often adopted in lesbian

YA romance and teen romance, wherein the responsibilities of higher education or careers pose a barrier to the central romantic relationship in the future, but those impending actions are not a threat to the ‘happy ending’ of the narrative. Ultimately, this final scene places value on two separate things: the joy derived from their love for one another and the passions of Taisin and Kaede as individuals. *Huntress* may create a new immersive world for the reader, but it also offers a different kind of resolution to a same-sex love story that is not dependent on the romance ‘happy ending’, one that the real world young adult reader may find more realistic.

In these two fantasy novels, Lo uses generic conventions and tropes of fantasy to build the narrative world for her immersive fantasies in *Ash* and *Huntress*. The use of magic, the engagement with the Fairy World, and the different societal rules in the narratives allow for opportunities to depict and explore same-sex desire and relationships without the real world constraints of coming out or the justification of the existence of LGBTQ people. Lo constructs a cultural precedence for these characters and their relationships in different ways, such as creating a body of fictional fairy tales that includes same-sex love stories and providing butch mentors that represent part of a larger LGBTQ community in this fantasy world, regardless of which century the narrative takes place. As a ‘literature of desire’ (Jackson 3), Lo participates in the genre of fantasy and addresses a ‘lack’ of same-sex love stories between female protagonists in fantasy YA literature. In the next section, I will compare and contrast how Lo engages with an analogous lack in the genre of science fiction and how the depictions of her characters and relationships in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* complicate and expand what is possible when science fiction generic tropes—such as the encounter with aliens and advanced medical technology—are employed to similar ends.

## **Breaking the Binaries: Identity and Relationships in Science Fiction Love Stories**

The definition of science fiction remains an open and on-going critical debate. Darko Suvin defines science fiction as ‘a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment’ (37; qtd in Roberts 8). Suvin’s definition is not dissimilar from Kathryn Hume’s definition of fantasy, which includes science fiction, as ‘*any departure from consensus reality*’ (21) and emphasises the intellectual work required by the reader to relate the estranged, fictional environment presented in the science fiction novel to their own social environment. Adam Roberts builds on Suvin’s definition by suggesting that science fiction be viewed ‘as a form of thought experiment, an elaborate ‘what if?’ game, where the consequences of some or other novum are worked through’ (9). ‘Novum’, or ‘nova’ in the plural, is a term coined by Suvin, meaning ‘new’ or ‘new thing’ in Latin, which refers to those elements in a science fiction narrative that represent a ““point of difference”” (7). Roberts breaks down these commonly used nova in science fiction into seven categories. In *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, Lo deploys tropes from over half of these categories, including the following: ‘spaceships [and] interplanetary or interstellar travel’; ‘aliens and the encounter with aliens’; ‘mechanical robots, genetic engineering, biological robots’; and ‘computers advanced technology’ (12). These kinds of points of difference are useful for the science fiction reader because, as Robert Scholes argues, such fiction ‘offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way (Scholes 2; qtd in Roberts 10). (Scholes uses the term ‘structural fabulation’ instead of science fiction for his critical theory, but his work nonetheless has been pivotal in the study of science fiction.) In reference to



Scholes' definition, Noga Applebaum argues that it particularly 'emphasises the function of [science fiction] as a vehicle for exploring contemporary dilemmas within the context of scientific and technological discoveries' (3). The contemporary dilemmas portrayed in science fiction novels can sometimes be coded representations of marginalised experiences, especially in regard to race and gender, but also sexuality. This process of 'figuratively symbolising' marginalised experiences in the science fiction world foregrounds 'the ideological constructions of otherness' for the reader in the real world (Roberts 19). Whereas Lo uses the Fairy World to code for otherness in her fantasy novels, highlighting a connection between particular human characters as 'other', she utilises generic tropes, such as the novum of the alien, to expose how those 'other' identities are constructed.

Jenny Wolmark argues that science fiction 'provides a rich source of generic metaphors for the depiction of otherness, and the "alien" is one of the most familiar' (2). This generic trope, she argues, 'enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary opposition which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination' (2). In *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, the binary of human/alien underpins the premise of the narrative. Protagonist Reese and male love interest David are saved from a fatal car crash by an Imrian (alien) research group working with the US government when they are given an adaptation procedure that inserts Imrian DNA into their own, fundamentally altering the structure of who they are as humans. When the information about this procedure is exposed, the Imrians make themselves known to the US public and Reese and David, along with female love interest Amber Brand, must figure out the truth behind this collaboration between humans and aliens. The central binary of human/alien also functions as a foil for other binary oppositions in the two novels, such as homosexual/heterosexual, monoamory/polyamory, and male/female. In her intention to 'bring the margin to the center' in her work, Lo's science fiction novels portray a

wider range of sexual and gender identities than her fantasy novels (although those identities are bound by the prejudices and politics of the contemporary US because of its setting). She uses various generic tropes in order to plausibly construct these identities, in particular the novels' bisexual protagonist and her relationships with both female and male characters. Wendy Gay Pearson argues that the inclusion of a lesbian or gay character in science fiction is 'not *per se* a radical or subversive strategy', but for a reader 'who is unused to—or perhaps searching for—a gay/lesbian presence within [science fiction]' 'the naturalization of a gay or lesbian character within a plot [...] may, temporarily, function as a novum for this reader' (15). Pearson's suggestion opens up the idea of the novum to include 'new things' which may be outside of the *social* experience of the reader—gay or lesbian characters, in her example—rather than restrict the concept to tropes such as new technologies or biomedical advancements. In *Adaptation and Inheritance*, the normalisation of bisexual characters and polyamorous relationships could similarly function as nova for some readers as the narrative exposes subject positions outside of normative binary oppositions. Similarly, for the purposes of this thesis, the representations of bisexual characters and polyamorous relationships in Lo's novels are also 'new' in comparison with the lesbian YA novels discussed thus far, signalling a shift towards more inclusive narratives on the spectrum of YA novels included in my research corpus.

Thus far in my thesis, I have mainly focused on the representations of lesbian characters within YA novels, but I now want to discuss Lo's depiction of her protagonist in relation to the depiction of other female bisexual characters in YA literature. By the end of the science fiction duology, Reese self-identifies as bisexual and demonstrates her sexual desire for both genders in the text through the relationships with her two love interests: David, a straight male character, and Amber, a self-identified lesbian character who is also an Imrian. Equal weight is given to Reese's

crushes on David and Amber, taking into consideration all of their feelings and sexual desires: the first kiss scenes in *Adaptation*—with Amber early in the narrative, with David in the final chapter—are pivotal to each individual romance plot, and the resolution of *Inheritance* accounts for the needs of the parties in both relationships. Lo's construction of Reese as a bisexual character helpfully shies away from stereotypical traits, which have muddled other portrayals of bisexual characters in YA novels, such as *The Bermudez Triangle* (2003) by Maureen Johnson and *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (2011) by Alex Sanchez, as referenced in Chapter One. Such stereotypes, Bonnie Kneen argues, 'reinforce the belief that bisexuality is an essence that shapes and defines identity and is evidenced in certain fundamental characteristics—attention-seeking and displaying signs of confusion or indecision—rather than in a sexual desire for people of more than one gender' (369). Of the majority of bisexual characters in YA literature, Kneen asserts that their portrayals are 'neither very bi nor particularly sexual' (when compared to how sexually gay or lesbian characters portrayed), and that they 'evade the plurality and sexuality of bisexuality, often submerging these attributes under a stereotyped essence' (375). These characterisations rely on a one-dimensional understanding of identity—much like real-life stereotypes of bisexuals as greedy and promiscuous, or of bisexuality as a phase or a temporary position between heterosexuality and homosexuality—and fail to represent a plurality of desire. As discussed in Chapter One, there are a dozen YA novels within my research corpus that portray a female bisexual protagonist or love interest. Notable exceptions that depict more nuanced characters include Nic and Battle in *Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan, who also kiss or have relationships with male characters in the novel, and Sophie in *Far From You* (2014) by Tess Sharpe, who demonstrates romantic and sexual attraction for her best friend, Mina, and her best friend's brother. According to Kneen, such YA novels would be considered positive portrayals of bisexual characters because

they establish ‘a character to be bisexual by showing that character experiencing (or having experienced) sexual desire for other characters of more than one gender’ (361). This section will examine the construction of Reese’s bisexuality and her relationships through key narrative elements, such as the first kiss and the resolution, as well as explore how the protagonist of Lo’s science fiction novels offer ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15) for bisexual readers, too.

In Lo’s science fiction novels, kissing marks the way forward. Each narrative element of the first kiss, like those in lesbian YA novels, acts as a catalyst for Reese to reflect on the construction of her self-identity, specifically challenging her reliance on a binary understanding of her world. Reese and Amber’s first kiss scene starts with Amber voicing her assumption that Reese is ‘not straight’. When Reese objects, Amber kisses her: ‘[Amber’s] lip gloss did taste like candy. It was slick and hard at the same time, and as soon as their lips touched, Reese thought she was going to fall apart from shaking so much. [...] And then Amber, pushing her back ever so gently, said softly, “See, I told you, you’re not straight”’ (Lo *Adaptation* 145-146). The scene is sensual and playful, repeating the trope of same-sex kisses between female characters as saccharine or sweet (to be explored further in Chapter Four), as well as intimately intertwined with Reese’s conception of her sexual identity. Like many other protagonists in lesbian YA romance novels, Reese feels a mix of desire and confusion. Lo illustrates this as Reese reflects on what has just happened once she is at home again: ‘[She] lay down on her bed, tracing a damp finger over the shape of her lips, remembering the way it had felt to kiss Amber. Warmth flushed her body. Did this make her gay?’ (149). While Reese notes that she has never kissed anyone before, there is still the implication that she presumed she was heterosexual. Similar to Liza’s internal revelation in *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden, the act of kissing directly correlates to the heroine’s consideration of her non-heteronormative identity. As the two

girls begin to date in *Adaptation*, Reese shies away from definitively labelling herself. This is especially evident during her revelation scene with her best friend Julian as he pushes her to label herself as gay or bisexual; Reese resists either label, choosing instead to declare herself ‘not...straight’ (207). However, the full meaning of her new relationship with Amber also appears to have not dawned on Reese until this conversation with Julian: “‘But yeah, I’m dating her.’” Saying the words suddenly made it real, and her stomach flipped. “‘Shit. I’m dating a girl’” (210). Reese does consider the label ‘bisexual’ during this conversation but dismisses it because she is afraid to fulfil the stereotype of the promiscuous or performative bisexual, like the ‘girls on reality TV [who make out] in front of guys’ (208) as a spectacle for male pleasure rather than an expression of their own same-sex desires. Reese is still unsure of this label at the end of the *Adaptation* when she questions whether or not to tell David about dating Amber for fear of his judgement, saying that ‘[straight] guys could be weird about bisexual girls. He might think that she’d be up for threesomes or that she’d dump him for a girl’ (350). Even as Reese breaks up with Amber and begins to pursue a relationship with David, her understanding of her sexuality remains in flux.

Reese’s relationship with David is equally important to the narrative, but her first kiss with him is not devoid of self-reflection or confusion either just because it is heterosexual in nature. Reese’s relationship with David presents its own dilemmas. First, their relationship directly follows her breakup with Amber, and Reese still has feelings and desires for her ex-girlfriend. This further complicates Reese’s understanding of her sexual identity as she experiences desire for David and Amber at the same time. Second, the question of what Reese and David are now—human, alien, adapted—is inextricably intertwined with the physical intimacies of their relationship. After the adaptation procedure altered their genetic structure to include Imrian DNA, Reese and David slowly learn what this means, particularly in regard to their

communication abilities. Over the course of the two novels, they learn about their ability to practice *susum 'urda*, a consciousness-sharing technique fundamental to Imrian society, as well as discover the ability to communicate telepathically, a by-product of the adaptation procedure that is unique to their experience. Lo hints at these consciousness-sharing abilities in the first kiss scene between Reese and David in *Adaptation*: 'She let down her guard. In an instant he was so much more than a physical presence next to her; it was like going from two to three dimensions in the blink of an eye. Now he was fully formed. His body was filled with a curling heat that made her knees weak. [...] He bent his head and kissed her (403-404). When the two teenagers physically touch just before they kiss, Lo describes the boundary between their physical bodies disappearing, an early description of *susum 'urda* before it is named or explained in the text. As Reese recalls this kiss in the second chapter of *Inheritance*, the memory is followed by her admission that 'she still didn't understand the full repercussions of what had been done to her in that adaptation chamber' (*Inheritance* 13), linking the two experiences in her mind. Part of Reese and David's attempt to understand 'what had been done' to them is to experiment through kissing. As Reese and David learn how to control their abilities, they attempt to a kiss without sharing consciousness: 'Even though she had kissed him before, she had never kissed him without being able to sense his internal self, and he felt so different now. Separate. A physical form she did not understand' (259). While they are only able to withstand this state for a few minutes before their desire for one another overrides their internal walls, they do gain new appreciation for the capabilities of the bodies they are now living in. By introducing *susum 'urda* as a novum within the science fiction narrative, Lo defamiliarises the heterosexual kiss by changing the manner in which the protagonist and her male love interest would be expected to emotionally and physically respond to the experience of a kiss. The question of their humanity thus becomes a fundamental aspect to the narrative

arc of the duology as the two ‘adapted’ characters navigate between human and Imrian cultures, understanding more of who they are as individuals through their intimate relationship. Reese’s first kisses with Amber *and* David stimulate an internal discussion of her sexual identity and, through her experiences with her girlfriend and her boyfriend, she ultimately decides that ‘bisexual’ is the best label to describe her desires and relationships.

While Reese feels comfortable in her new sexual identity, she remains unsure of how to approach her simultaneous romantic and sexual feelings for both Amber and David. Reese’s subsequent kissing scenes in *Inheritance* explore her romantic feelings for her two love interests and foreshadow the polyamorous resolution of the novels’ central romantic relationships. In Reese and David’s second kiss, their strong sexual desires are interrupted when Reese has a flashback to passionately kissing Amber. Because of their (yet untrained) ability to practice *susum’urda*, David also sees this memory, leaving Reese horrified and David confused. That night, Reese’s thoughts keep ‘circling back to David and Amber. Amber and David’ (162). When Amber attempts to woo Reese back, they kiss once more, but it is still complicated: ‘[Reese] felt intoxicated: held between Amber’s hands, pressed against her body. But beneath the luxurious slide of desire, she felt a keen, persistent ache. Even if she was in love with Amber, that didn’t stop her from being in love with David’ (340). Amber counters the argument that Reese cannot love them both at the same time by replying, ‘[it’s] not like you have a limited supply of love. You can love more than one person at once’ (340). Lo utilises the kissing scenes as narrative elements throughout the novels to challenge aspects of Reese’s identity: her sexuality, her humanity, and her ability to love more than one person. In this way, the kissing scenes are more akin to those in lesbian YA romance novels, where the first kiss scenes are a catalyst for the revelation of a new sexual identity, than they are to the first kiss scenes in Lo’s fantasy novels, which

primarily function as a confirmation of the desire between the protagonist and love interest. These challenges ultimately build towards different conceptualisations of identity that challenge Reese's binary construction of the world (heterosexual/homosexual, human/alien, and monoamory/polyamory) and allow her to accept possibilities of operating outside of those binaries. The resolution of the love story in Lo's science fiction duology results in the agreement between Reese, Amber, and David to form a polyamorous relationship as Reese accepts that she cannot deny her equal, requited feelings for her two love interests.

Lo adopts a cautious, educational tone as she presents the option of polyamory for her characters' relationship as one that takes practice, consideration, and communication. Reflecting on the first months of their triad relationship, Reese thinks that the 'only thing stopping her from calling it off was the knowledge that it would ultimately make them all equally miserable' (464). A legitimate relationship structure practiced by a minority population in the US, polyamory is the agreement to be in a romantic relationship with two or more people with the knowledge and consent of all partners. The relationship structure is also a generic trope in science fiction. In *Inheritance*, the suggestion to form a polyamorous relationship originally comes from Amber. For her, the conceptualisation of plural love and relationships stems from a normative, lived understanding of polyamory on her home planet, Kurra: she herself has three parents—a mother and two fathers (442). She explains to Reese that while polyamory is non-normative on Earth, this romantic relationship structure is the norm in Imrian culture. Normalising polyamory within an alien culture adds another layer of 'otherness' to the 'alien' in the science fiction text, but it can also allow for a concept like polyamory, which may be a novum to the reader, to be introduced and engaged with from a 'safe' distance. Lo tempers the exuberance of Reese's 'happy ending' to her love story with Amber and David by emphasizing the drawbacks of this relationship



configuration. As they prepare to leave Earth, Reese offers her final thoughts on the subject as well as her purpose for the journey: ‘When the possibility of spending a year on Kurra—where plural relationships were normal—was raised, Reese knew they had to go. They might be able to figure it out on their own here on Earth, but it could only be easier if they were in a place where nobody thought their arrangement was unusual’ (465). Reese will act as an ambassador from Earth to Kurra but more importantly, the passage implies, the shared happiness of the triad depends on Reese reconciling her practical and emotional concerns about polyamorous relationships with her love for her two partners. Reese’s comments point to the larger necessity for individuals in minority identities or relationships to be surrounded by positive examples that reflect their personal circumstances. Here, Lo again demonstrates her overall intention to ‘bring the margin to the center’ through the depiction of a polyamorous relationship between bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual characters, and she provides examples of new ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15) in YA literature. However, the resolution is also pessimistic and lacks the satisfaction of a ‘happy ending’ of a lesbian YA romance novel because the future of the relationships remain tenuous and conditional. Reese has indicated that she believes her relationships only ‘might’ work on Earth, and there is no guarantee their rapport will be any different once they return to humankind’s social pressures of monoamory.

Lo also diversifies her representations of gender throughout both novels, with varying degrees of subtly and didacticism. On the one hand, she lightly challenges conceptions of gender norms by depicting female characters in stereotypically male professional roles. These include secondary characters Catherine Sheridan (District Attorney to the City of San Francisco and Reese’s mother) and Dr Evelyn Brand (Head of Project PLATO and Amber’s mother); and tertiary characters U.S. President Elizabeth Randall, Dr Wong (family doctor), Dr Singh (Head of Project Blue Base), and

U.S. Senator Joyce Michaelson. Like the use of non-Anglo surnames discussed in the opening section of this chapter, the inclusion of a female president, for example, may ‘disrupt the tendencies’ (Crenshaw 1241) of some readers to assume personal information based on their title or position alone. On the other hand, Lo pushes her readers to further reconsider questions of gender with the introduction of the character of Eres Tilhar. Towards the beginning of *Inheritance*, Reese and David attend lessons with Eres to learn how to use *susum’urda*. However, Reese spends most of their first meeting trying to determine if Eres is male or female (Lo *Inheritance* 117). The text does not clarify Eres’ sex or gender in this scene, and Reese raises her quandary with Amber shortly thereafter:

‘I forgot, Eres must look different to you. Eres is *ummi*, a teacher. Teachers are not male or female. They’re... *ummi*.’

Reese thought back to her conversations with Bri last year when she had been on her gender theory kick. ‘You mean she’s—he’s—Eres is a third gender?’

Amber seemed to struggle for a moment to find the right words. ‘I guess you could say that *ummi* is kind of a third gender, but it’s more like gender doesn’t matter to *ummi*; it’s no longer relevant to them’ (124).

A back and forth dialogue follows that includes discussions of pronoun usage and preference, the dependency of the English language on gendered pronouns, and identity categories more generally. Amber declares that she doubts ‘Eres cares what English pronouns’ she uses (124) because ‘pronouns in Imrian are gender-neutral’ (125).

Throughout this scene, Amber describes one of a handful of genderqueer characters (i.e. characters depicted as gender non-conforming) portrayed in YA literature, but the six-page discussion of sex, gender, and sexuality between Reese and Amber errs on the side of didacticism, including implied references to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).

Lo's execution of this scene falters slightly as it handles the trends and debates regarding the representation of genderqueer characters in YA literature more superficially than her discussions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters in her novels. One minor point is the lack of the singular 'they/their' as an option for pronouns for Eres. The usage and preference of 'they/their' as singular pronouns by those who identify as genderqueer, transgender, or gender non-conforming has become more widely discussed in popular culture in the US through the theorising of and reporting on transgender rights and representations. The American Dialect Society even named the singular 'they' as the Word of the Year for 2015 'for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional binary of *he* and *she*' ('2015 Word of the Year'; R.L.G.). It is arguable, though, that Lo was writing in a historical moment just before the 'transgender tipping point' (Steinmetz; Holpuch), and that she avoids the issue syntactically by not having the narrator or Reese emphatically choose a pronoun on Eres' behalf. (I, however, have required the use of pronouns in the following discussion of Eres and so have chosen to use the singular 'they/their' pronouns to reflect the current language usage when representing gender non-conforming persons and characters.) The larger issue in the portrayal of Eres in *Inheritance* is that they do not speak on their own behalf regarding their gender identity. Instead, two non-*ummi* characters discuss one *ummi*'s gender identity, making fluctuating decisions about pronoun usage based on their clothing and appearance; Amber recalls her use of both 'she' and 'he' for Eres and that it 'depends on what Eres is wearing' (*Inheritance* 124). Amber also posits that *ummi* are also 'basically beyond that stuff' because they have experienced so many other lives through teaching *susum'urda* (124). Ultimately, the scene aims to actively educate its intended young adult readership about gender non-conforming identities rather than rely on the

portrayal of Eres' character, whose gender could have been a feature of their character rather than their function in the narrative, to communicate the same implicit message.

Lo has stated online that she wrote *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* 'partially to be a metaphor on [sic] bisexuality' ('On Bisexual Characters'). Her authorial intention to challenge identity categories set up in binary oppositions, from sexuality to humanity, is evident throughout both of the novels. In taking this approach, the narrative explores, what Wolmark argues as, the 'possibilities of alternative and non-hierarchal definitions of gender and identity' (2) through Lo's characters' relationships. First, Lo challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary by focusing Reese's love story on the portrayal of her sexual desires and romantic relationships for characters of more than one gender. Second, Lo challenges a singular view of relationship structures as she contrasts the expectation for monoamory against the polyamorous resolution of Reese's relationships with David and Amber. Finally, she engages with the binary construction of human/alien by positing that Reese and David exist in neither category: they are no longer human because their DNA now contains Imrian DNA, but they are not alien either because they can communicate telepathically. Instead, the 'adapted' characters occupy a space outside of the 'ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between self and other, human and alien' (2). With each of these narrative challenges to normative constructions of identity, Lo mediates the discussion of binary oppositions through the main actors and central romantic relationships of *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*. By blending generic conventions from science fiction and romance, Lo centres marginal identities and allows the reader to confront previously held assumptions by experiencing them through the estranged environment of the narrative.

## Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to examine Lo's fantasy and science fiction novels, in a single-author case study, for the construction of non-heteronormative female characters and their romantic relationships through the genre blending of romance and speculative fiction. Lo's first four YA novels demonstrate a dedication to increasing the diversity of racial, gender, and sexual identities portrayed in YA literature and an authorial intention to serve marginalised YA readerships. While the areas of YA fantasy and science fiction have seen a small increase in the number of novels published with lesbian and female bisexual *protagonists*, Lo's novels are still a minority in a body of literature dominated by white, heterosexual protagonists. By participating in the separate genres of fantasy and science fiction, Lo uses a variety of generic codes and worldbuilding techniques to align her characters with non-normative identities and engage her readers in worlds different from their own. In her fantasy novels, she infuses the terms 'huntress' and 'sage' with new meanings, both to deepen the culture of her fictional world and to allow for opportunities of recognition for the reader. Lo's inclusion of same-sex love stories in the fairy tales of the fantasy world of *Ash* and the portrayal of Fin as a butch mentor in *Huntress* normalises the respective romantic relationships against a background of a wider 'lesbian' community. Apart from the main conflict of the narrative of *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, the depiction of the central romantic relationship in Lo's science fiction duology relies on the deployment of multiple generic tropes. The authorial decision to construct the character of love interest Amber as an Imrian and from a home planet where plural relationships are the norm (as well as being the product of a triad relationship) lends legitimacy to the decision by Reese, Amber, and David to form a polyamorous relationship. At the same time, the near-future but realistic setting of San Francisco also means that Lo acknowledges that such a

relationships structure might be a challenge in the real world, cautioning that the success of the relationship remains uncertain. Alongside the resolution of the central romantic relationships in the science fiction novels, Lo's depiction of Reese as a non-stereotypical bisexual character who has desire for and relationships with both male and female characters sought to remedy the lack of positive portrayals of bisexual characters in YA literature when the novels were published in the early 2010s. While at times both implicit and didactic in her inclusion of diversity in her speculative fiction YA novels, Lo's work broadens the depictions of non-heteronormative characters and their same-sex relationships in YA literature 'in ways that open up new questions' (Mendlesohn xvi) about what is possible for this readership. In the following chapter, I will examine three more YA novels that participate in 'genre bending and blending' (Cart 95) that ask philosophically motivated 'what if' questions regarding sexuality, relationships, and, most crucially, the concept of love.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Love, Wonder, and Expanding the Range:**

#### **Thought Experiments and Lesbian Love Stories in the ‘Adolescent Novel of Ideas’**

Thus far, the thesis has explored the lesbian love story in relation to narrative structure, character development, and the young adult (YA) novels’ participation within select genres, such as romance, fantasy, and science fiction. In this final chapter examining lesbian and bisexual protagonists and their same-sex relationships in the form of YA novels, the analysis seeks to expand the discussion of love beyond its romantic associations. Each of the novels to be discussed in this chapter feature a love story, but they also particularly encourage a sense of intellectual wonder. All published in the same year in the early 2010s, the novels include: *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) by Madeleine George, *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King, and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth. Utilising these texts, this chapter explores a sense of ‘wonder’, both in the wonderings by the characters in the YA novels *and* in the potential to provoke reflection in its readers. To inform my discussion of wonder I look to critical work on the ‘adolescent novel of ideas’ as well as thought experiments in children’s literature. The selected novels from my research corpus demonstrate an intention to engage the implied reader in wondering, specifically about love in its multiple forms, by blending conventions from various genres within each narrative. I draw on philosophical, biomedical, and literary theories to understand the implications of the novels’ constructions of different types of love. The kinds of love depicted include romantic and passionate love as well as friendship, familial love, self-love, and a love for humanity. I argue that the texts examined in this chapter are not interested in telling a singular love story, but rather a story (or *stories*) about love. As discussed in previous chapters, the majority of the YA novels in my corpus utilise the

romantic relationship as a parallel to the heroine's coming out story in which she ultimately claims an identity category, such as 'lesbian' or 'bisexual'. The novels in this chapter, however, portray non-heteronormative identities as evolving or open-ended. The characters depicted in the YA novels by George, King, and Danforth challenge identity categorisation or separate their identity formation from a central or singular romantic relationship. Overall, I argue that these novels have the potential to shift the reader's understanding of 'a love story'. If the lesbian YA romance novels explored in Chapter One are at the conventional end of a spectrum of lesbian love stories, then I suggest that the YA novels in this chapter signal the opposite end of that spectrum, expanding in unconventional directions. In the following section, I build on the discussion of genre, incorporating criticism regarding children's and young adult literature that provokes wonderment, and opening a dialogue regarding multiple forms of love, before examining each novel in relation to their individual generic engagements.

### **Wondering, About Love**

The texts examined in this chapter appear to wander amongst genres whilst the protagonists and implied authors wonder about love. One could argue that the selected YA novels do not particularly belong to one genre or another. As discussed in the Introduction, though, Jacques Derrida argues that a text does not belong to a genre, but '*participates* in one or several genres' (Derrida 230; qtd in Frow 25), and John Frow suggests that texts are 'shaped' by genre and that 'participation in a genre takes many forms' (28). As argued throughout the thesis, to participate in genre is to shape and be shaped by the process, and the novels in this chapter are purposefully engaged in genre blending as one way to provoke contemplation in the reader. *The Difference Between*



*You and Me* is shaped by realism, *Ask the Passengers* draws on magical realism, and both borrow from romance conventions for their love stories whilst also relying on postmodern literary techniques to construct their narrative structures. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a historical novel set in the recent past that depicts isolated periods in the protagonist's adolescence in a manner that mimics the use of time in the memoir genre. Each of these novels is preoccupied with a set of philosophical themes or forms of experimentation. In the previous chapter, I examined Lo's *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* as YA novels that utilise generic codes and conventions of science fiction to expand a reader's understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships. Discussions of science fiction are useful in demonstrating *how* texts participate in genre, but they are also helpful in understanding *why* texts participate in genre. As Adam Roberts suggests, science fiction can be viewed 'as a form of thought experiment, an elaborate "what if?" game' because 'it is the scientific method, the logical working through of a particular premise' that is important to the genre of science fiction (9). I suggest that the narratives examined in this chapter work through 'a particular premise'—of loving, being loved, sharing love, and questioning love—through their participation in various genres and, in doing so, encourage the reader to wonder about their own relationship to love.

As an introduction to the concept of the thought experiment, Roy Sorenson draws a connection between the physical wanderings of young migratory animals and the cognitive wonderings of human young adults. He writes:

Experts on migration explain that arrivals go through an exploratory phase before settling into adulthood. The *wanderings* help new members find fresh territory and *expand the range* of the species as a whole. What holds for fish and birds and elk and seals holds for human beings. However, our exploratory drive has a richer array of effect, since human youth is prolonged and much of this drive is sublimated through our mental lives (7, emphasis mine).

Sorenson emphasises both the desire for young adults to explore and that this development takes place, for the most part, as an internal process. His example also implicitly suggests that this process may positively ‘expand the range’ (7) for human beings. The recognition of this intensified exploratory phase in human development is arguably reflected in the narratives written more recently for a young adult audience. Writing in the mid-1990s, Peter Hollindale coined the term the ‘adolescent novel of ideas’ in an essay of the same name, wherein he grappled with how to defend and define the discussion of the ‘highly intelligent and demanding’ (86) adolescent literature that emerged in the United States and Great Britain from the mid-1960s onward. Without disregarding the place for popular literature for young adults, he nonetheless argued that contemporary novels for adolescents operated on a spectrum ranging from ‘simple children’s books with added sex, violence, and family collapse’ to philosophically motivated novels that ask ‘questions about *Homo sapiens*’ that adult readers would also find challenging (85). Hollindale aimed to illustrate the ‘best achievements’ of the latter by suggesting the explanatory term of ‘the adolescent novel of ideas’ as a label to group together the novels (85). He argued that this category of novels is exemplified by narratives that ““grow the mind a size larger”” (86) and utilised examples from Robert Cormier, Peter Dickinson, and Ursula LeGuin to demonstrate his points. Hollindale states that the adolescent novel of ideas ‘is marked at its best by the logic, spaciousness, and lack of compromise of its “what if’s?”’ (86). In Roberts’ discussion of science fiction, the ‘what if?’ narrative to which Hollindale refers is the logical working through of a thought experiment. For Hollindale, the adolescent novel of ideas explores the human condition and through the experience of the novel the reader has the opportunity to gain new knowledge.

Lisa Sainsbury’s 2016 essay ““But the Soldier’s Remains Were Gone”’: Thought Experiments in Children’s Literature’ focuses on ‘philosophically motivated novels’

and aims to identify how those narratives might structurally invite the implied reader to inquire or question their own expectations through thought experiments. She first engages with wonder as the starting point for her examination of thought experiments in children's literature, citing an example from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Using Alice as a model for 'the child as thinker', Sainsbury outlines the significance that 'Alice *wonders* during the moments of her fall' into a land named after the very act 'in a book concerned with metaphysical pondering' (3). As Alice wonders aloud about her surroundings within the narrative, so too can the child reader wonder and remark upon that which they observe in the books they read. Texts that provoke such reflection, Sainsbury argues, 'can be distilled into the sort of proposition (or in some texts there might be a series of propositions) that marks out a thought experiment' (8). Utilising novels such as *Carrie's War* (1974) by Nina Bawden and *A Game of Soldiers* (1985) by Jan Needle, Sainsbury demonstrates how the child reader can be '[confronted] with the thought experiment' and then 'invited to *think* and *experiment*...and to move beyond the book in the philosophical direction of *subsequence*' (8). In this context, the thought experiment encourages the child reader to speculate on the narrative's premise and actively wonder how that might relate to their individual experience of the world. Sainsbury underscores that the thought experiment in children's literature invites the implied reader 'to test the ground of human experience' (15). It is this aspect of the thought experiment in children's and young adult literature that is particularly relevant to the portrayal of same-sex love stories. Such narratives still comprise only a relatively small proportion of the literature available to young adult readers, and a novel about two young women in love may be an early source or primary example of that experience for some readers. The narratives examined in this chapter invite the young adult reader, in particular, to *wonder* about the concept of love in its myriad forms and to vicariously test this fundamental element of human experience through the depiction of a variety of

relationship configurations. This process, to borrow from Hollindale, may have the additional benefit or intention to “grow the mind a size larger” (86) by asking philosophically motivated questions about the human experience.

In this chapter I consider how the theme of love, as one fundamental experience of being human, is incorporated into the narratives of YA novels with lesbian and bisexual protagonists. Thus far, this thesis has focused on the depiction of romantic love between the protagonist and her love interest(s). However, romantic love is not the only form of love, nor is there one type of romantic love. In Ancient Greece, romantic love was not understood singularly; instead, there were three different types of romantic love that referred to various aspects of love and desire between two individuals. First, aptly named for the Greek god of love and fertility, *eros* stood for sexual passion and desire. Roman Krznaric writes that *eros* ‘represented one of [the] most important varieties of love’ even as it was simultaneously ‘viewed as a dangerous, fiery and irrational form of love that could take hold of you and possess you’ (5). As a form of love, *eros* shares qualities with Roland Barthes’ concept of ‘ravishment’, or ‘love at first sight’ (188). Possession is central to Barthes’ understanding, as he describes ‘ravishment’ as the moment in which the lover is “‘ravished” (captured and enchanted)’ by the sight of the ‘loved object’ (188). Just as the ‘first kiss’ is a narrative element in lesbian YA romance novels, so too can there be a moment of ‘ravishment’ which acts as the starting point for the *eros* relationship. Nina LaCour’s *Everything Leads to You* (2014) utilises *eros* for its narrative, as Emi and Ava’s love is an electric and overwhelming kind of love that is evident at their first introduction. Akin to *eros* is *ludus*, or playful love. By definition, *ludus* is understood as broadly as ‘the playful affection between children or casual lovers’ (Krznaric 8). In YA novels, *ludus* can sometimes be employed as playfulness in order to reflect the youth of the characters, the romantic chemistry between the lovers, or both. For example, the romantic love and desire that grows between Joanna and Mary

Carlson in *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit* (2016) is founded through a friendship that is humorous and light-hearted. Thirdly, *pragma* is characterised as the ‘deep understanding’ between partners in a long-term relationship or marriage (Krznaric 9). Many of the YA novels discussed in this thesis incorporate aspects of both *eros* and *ludus* in the telling of the love stories, but as the narratives generally portray the beginning of a first relationship there is not the opportunity to explore what *pragma* might look like in this context. That said, some authors do incorporate adult lesbian couples as tertiary characters, who operate as mentors to the protagonist and models of same-sex relationships rooted in *pragma*, such as Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer in *Annie on my Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden.

The ancient Greeks also noted that the capacity for love included relationships with family members and friends as well as for the self and the world. Considered the ‘virtuous’ form of love, *philia* was usually understood as ‘friendship’, but it also applies to familial relationships. Krznaric describes it as ‘the closeness and affection displayed between parent and child, or the deep non-sexual intimacy [. . .] felt between siblings or cousins’ (7). As outlined in Chapter One, parents and siblings often feature prominently in the narrative of lesbian YA novels because the majority of protagonists are still in high school and live at home with their parent(s) or guardian. Esme’s mutual love for her father is evident throughout her story in *Sister Mischief* (2011) by Laura Goode as she comes out, has her first romantic relationship, and heals a broken heart, for example. *Philautia* is the fifth form of love, understood as self-love or self-respect. This form of love could be expressed with both negative and positive outcomes: one that results in narcissism and one that ‘enhances our wider capacity to love’ (Krznaric 10-11). Characteristically in lesbian YA novels, as the protagonist learns to love herself, her ‘capacity’ to love another person intimately or to accept family or friends also widens. This portrayal of *philautia* as a positive form of love is most common amongst

my corpus of YA novels, but there are some secondary characters whose *philautia* verges into narcissism; one such character is Emily in *The Difference Between You and Me* as I will discuss later in this chapter. Finally, *agape*, or ‘self-less love’, was defined ‘by its lack of exclusiveness’ (Krznaric 9). This form of love ‘was to be extended altruistically to all human beings.... [and] offered without obligation or expectation of return—a transcendent love based on human solidarity’ (9). As I will examine, *Ask the Passengers* is particularly focused on wondering about the potential for *agape* in one’s life. These different forms of love underpin a person’s myriad relationships throughout their lives, and this is acknowledged in each of the following selected novels. These narratives work through individual premises that invite the implied reader to wonder about the idea of love and to test new experiences in the act of reading.

In their book *A General Theory of Love* (2000), Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon draw on a range of biomedical research, as well as poetry and literature, to explore how ‘[l]ove makes us who we are, and who we can become’ (viii). In other words, how we, as humans, shape and are shaped by love. By portraying a range of human experiences that revolve around the act and complexity of loving other individuals, the novels examined in this chapter demonstrate this shaping process. By participating in multiple genres, the novels blend generic and postmodern conventions in order to ask philosophically motivated questions about the experience of being human. These premises and themes can be identified clearly in their opening pages—the ‘manifesto’ at the beginning of *The Difference Between You and Me*, the prologue in *Ask the Passengers*, and the opening line of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*—and my analysis will build from these initial introductions. Over the course of the narratives, the female protagonists in these texts continue to wonder aloud and work through their individual ‘what if?’ scenarios. One way that the authors disrupt the singular love story is by depicting more than one loving romantic or sexual partner for the protagonist,

giving (more) attention to familial and friend relationships, and/or focusing on the protagonist's love for herself as equally important to any other loving relationship in her life. By expanding the range of the love story in lesbian YA novels, the authors of these narratives challenge the reader's expectations for what is possible inside, and outside, the narrative in regard to love.

### **Learning Self-Love – *The Difference Between You and Me***

#### ***THE NOLAW MANIFESTO***

##### ***Demanding Justice Now!***

*For all Weirdos, Freaks, Queer Kids, Revolutionaries, Nerds, Dweebs, Misfits, Loudmouths, Rapunzels Trapped in Their Towers, Trolls Trapped under Their Bridges, Animals Abused by Their Masters, Detentionites, Monsters, and Saints.*  
*By the National Organization to Liberate All Weirdos, or NOLAW (George 1).*

*The Difference Between You and Me* by Madeleine George is a YA novel set in contemporary small-town America where protagonist Jesse Halberstam has founded the National Organisation for the Liberation of All Weirdos (NOLAW). George's novel uses conventions from realism to shape its narrative as the story is told in sporadically alternating chapters between Jesse, love interest Emily Miller, and friend and fellow activist Esther Mainz. Jesse's chapters are narrated in omniscient third person and the narrative distance offers a degree of authenticity to her experiences not afforded to the other characters. Emily and Esther's chapters are narrated in first person and the tone leaves each character's narration open to questions of reliability as both are portrayed as individuals who have created public personas to hide the truth or personal anguish. As Jesse and Emily, in particular, are confronted with situations that challenge their desires

and constructions of identity, each young woman resolves her personal conflict by remaining true to who she believes herself to be. Throughout the analysis, I will relate each point to the depiction of different kinds of love throughout the novel: *eros* in the romantic relationship between Jesse and Emily, *agape* as demonstrated through Jesse's capacity for love for the world, and the cultivation of *philautia*, or self-love, by the main characters. In constructing an 'adolescent novel of ideas', George invites the reader to wonder what (loving) actions they would take if they were in Jesse's shoes—her 'huge, scuffed fisherman's boot[s]' (George 5)—as Jesse comes to her own conclusions by the narrative's resolution.

Stylistically, *The Difference Between You and Me* uses themes and tropes from YA novels written about the high school drama of interpersonal relationships, specifically echoing those novels as told from multiple perspectives and mainly written for female teenage readership; *The Bermudez Triangle* (2003) by Maureen Johnson and *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (2011) by Alex Sanchez are examples of this genre that include lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters. George shapes this (sometimes superficial) genre with her emphasis on activism and personal growth rather than giving focus to mending interpersonal relationships. She is very intentionally directing the implicit ideologies of the novel to the young adult reader who is still in high school and wants to actively contribute to their communities. The novel's central theme of activism is communicated through various elements throughout the novel. These include: the NOLAW manifestos; the discussions of student-led organisations focused on bettering humanity, particularly NOLAW and the Student Peace Action Network (SPAN) founded by Esther; concerns about urban sprawl in rural areas; and the importance of LGBTQ inclusion. The focus on activism, while at times didactic, engages the implied reader in questions of justice, liberation, equality, and love. The 'Make a Difference' appendix included in the first edition of the novel underscores the potential for the



reader to take action in their own communities, whether or not their activism is related to the issues addressed in the narrative, once they have finished reading. The first half of this section will examine how George creates this ‘call to action’ through the peritextual element of the NOLAW manifesto at the opening of the novel. The second half of this section will then explore how those political themes relate to the personal experiences of the protagonist and her same-sex relationship with her love interest.

The NOLAW manifesto is a document motivated by *agape* and ostensibly defined by ‘its lack of exclusiveness’ (Krznaric 9). The full manifesto, a six-point agenda detailing the organisation’s demands for justice and freedom for all ‘Weirdos’, is a pseudo-peritextual element to the novel situated between the title page and the first chapter that the reader encounters without an introduction or foreword. The narrative then begins with Jesse’s attempt to plaster the manifesto around the halls of her high school and here the reader learns that Jesse is the founder, sole member, and manifesto creator of NOLAW, whose mission is to change the world by ‘tearing down quote unquote “normal society”’ and replacing it with the ‘Kingdom of Weirdness’ (2). By setting the manifesto without context or explanation, George implicitly asks the reader to first engage with this piece as a stand-alone set of statements and demands. This may prompt a series of questions for the reader: Does the reader agree? Is this a serious manifesto or satire? What would justice and freedom look like for ‘All Weirdos’? With its use of multiple fonts as well as bold and italics for emphasis, the rousing and evocative manifesto forces the reader to decode the message before proceeding with the narrative (and, potentially, return to it throughout the reading of the novel). First, the word ‘Weirdos’ is used as an umbrella term for an array of identities, such as ‘Freaks, Queer Kids, Revolutionaries, Dweebs, Misfits, and Loudmouths’ (1). The majority of these identities are nicknames or derogatory names often used in the context of school, playground, or social groups. (‘Revolutionaries’ is the exception and reflects the

identity that Jesse aspires to be, but does not feel comfortable claiming yet.) The manifesto's inclusiveness quickly morphs to include the fantastic—'Rapunzels Trapped in Their Towers', 'Trolls Trapped Under Their Bridges', and 'Monsters'—as well as figures such as abused animals, trouble-making teenagers, and 'Saints' (1). While there is a shock factor at play in the reclamation of these identities, the categorical list of 'Weirdos' for whom NOLAW demands justice provides an opportunity for reader identification, opening itself up to any reader who might find themselves in this landscape of identities. Once the reader assesses the information about the origin of NOLAW, it is clear that Jesse's intentions behind the creation and distribution of the manifesto are two-fold: she is determined to include anyone who might identify as a 'Weirdo' as well as cultivate a community culture that thrives on *agape*.

While the NOLAW manifesto seeks to foster *agape* for those individuals who do not fit into 'quote unquote "normal society"', the internal arguments also suggest an element of naivety in Jesse's activism as some of the statements enact similar kinds of methods of judgement that she seeks to disarm. In particular, the manifesto's main points are proclamations that set abstract ideas in opposition to one another. Point I declares 'NORMALCY IS DEATH!' (2). This provocative statement does not define what normalcy is or how this set of actions might lead to death. Instead, the novel implies that if Jesse were to adopt them, she would experience a 'death' of who she believes herself to be. Point II proclaims 'Weirdness is Life!' (2). Here, Jesse attempts to build a rhetorical argument that emotionally engages her audience with the content of the manifesto. To do so, she sets the abstract concepts of 'Normalcy' and 'Weirdness' into an imaginary life or death scenario. This technique is compelling, and it is mirrored in the social dichotomy portrayed in the novel between Emily and Jesse. Emily embodies 'the perfect small town girl' in everything from her appearance to her choice of boyfriend to her extracurricular activities. Her presence in the novel sets up an

attraction of opposites between her and Jesse, but, in this context, her behaviour is meant to provide a contrasting example of a limited life one may have if ‘normalcy’ is adhered to. In addition, Jesse implicitly communicates what it feels like *to be her* in the world. Her weirdness gives her ‘life’: passion, self-expression, and a sense of being grounded. This valuation of Jesse’s self-perception becomes evident in the following two points as Point III claims weirdness to be ‘VASTLY SUPERIOR’ while Point IV affirms that ‘JUDGEMENTAL PEOPLE SUCK!’ (2). The rhetorical issue with this latter statement is that it is inherently judgemental and implies that ‘normal society’ is vastly *inferior*. The manifesto is intended to encourage openness and *agape*, but the method is at times confrontational and contradictory. Some readers may recognise the irony in these statements and enjoy its playfulness. Others may wonder about the effectiveness of Jesse’s communication style and consider whether they might make their own manifesto differently. Finally, the reader may also very well relate to the dramatic scenario of ‘normal vs. weird’ to their own experiences within the high school setting. I argue that the language of the manifesto derives from George’s intention to connect with the reader who may have faced harassment, abuse, or judgement for not being ‘normal’, a set of experiences that George explores further through Jesse’s character.

As the narrative unfolds, the reader learns that this project is deeply personal to Jesse because it is directly tied to her primary identity categories: she is an out lesbian who receives daily harassment in her school and hometown for her sexuality, her masculine gender presentation, and her life-long activism. NOLAW as an organisation is an extension of those identity categories and the manifestos ‘are [Jesse’s] earnest work, her best idea about how to change the culture of the school’ in order to end the oppression and abuse of herself and others like her (54). The enactment of this ethos of the ‘personal as political’ is most evident in Point III of the manifesto, which begins

with the call for 'Weirdos [to] COME OUT!' (2). Likening the experience of being a 'Weirdo' to the experience of being a LGBTQ person, the manifesto uses the language of 'coming out' to mean the declaration and the reclamation of identity categories that are often seen as 'other'. Jesse lives 'out' as a Weirdo in her daily life and she expresses her identity first and foremost through her appearance: she has messy short hair that she trims with a pocketknife and a quasi-uniform of 'a ringer tee, cargo pants and fisherman's boots [knee-high wellington boots]' (13). Her 'Weirdo' aesthetic combines masculine clothing with an unconventional approach to fashion, particularly in evidence when she pairs her fisherman boots with a pale blue, second-hand, 70s-style tuxedo for the two formal school dances in the narrative. Some readers may read Jesse's aesthetic as butch, as discussed in Chapter Two in lesbian pulp fiction and specifically illustrated with the character of Mike in Julie Anne Peter's *Pretend You Love Me* (2011), or genderqueer (a gender identity category that is not exclusively masculine or feminine); however, Jesse does not use either of these terms in reference to herself and simply remarks that there are 'lots of different ways to be a girl' (11). Overall, her aesthetic emphasises her political identity category over her gender or sexual identities (although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive).

Living 'out' as a Weirdo comes at an emotional cost, though, as Jesse receives criticism and abuse for her appearance. For example, when in the girls' bathroom, one of Emily's friends sarcastically reminds Jesse that they are in 'the *girls*' room' (10), implicitly questioning Jesse's gender identity. The third-person narrator informs the reader that Jesse frequently encounters this kind of microaggression: 'in the bathroom at the library, the locker room at the pool, Friday's, Starbucks, the ladies fitting room at the hideous disgusting hateful Fashion Bug, at school, at school, all the time at school' (10). George uses free indirect narration, bringing humour and levity to a repeated situation that offers evidence of the discrimination Jesse experiences. At the same time,

the implied author is also speaking directly to the implied reader who may (or may not) have encountered similar prejudice, or have had real-life experiences that mirror Jesse's fictional ones, as a way of offering empathy. In spite of the abuse, Jesse stands firm in her position because she believes that the more people who 'come out' as 'weird, queer, freakish, nerdy, dweeby, loudmouthed, or otherwise unfit' the more rapidly conditions will change for the better (2). By single-handedly creating NOLAW as an organisation, producing the manifestos, and living 'out' as her Weirdo self, Jesse finds a way to exist in a world that wants to diminish who she is for the sake of conformity.

Through the manifesto and Jesse's characterisation, George engages the young adult reader in asking politically motivated questions while at the same time using generic codes from romance to further emotionally engage the reader. The central romantic relationship in *The Difference Between You and Me* is an attraction of opposites: Jesse's political beliefs are in stark contrast with Emily's politics. The central barrier to Jesse and Emily's relationship is a conflict of interest regarding the involvement of fictional superstore corporation StarMart (a stand in for Wal-Mart) in their hometown and high school. In the novel, Emily courts sponsorship from StarMart for high school events, accepts an unpaid internship at their headquarters, and believes the corporation has the community's best interests in mind. Jesse, on the other hand, is anti-corporation and against sprawl (the first topic in the 'Make a Difference' section at the end of the book), and actively campaigns with Esther against StarMart. Jesse and Emily's romantic relationship ultimately reaches an impasse over the corporate sponsorship of a school dance. One disappointed reviewer gave the novel 'one star' and wrote that she had hoped that the romance in *The Difference Between You and Me* would 'result in a novel about their figuring out how to be together despite those things. When Emily said they had nothing in common, I was hoping that maybe they'd find things, or discover things about each other to bond over. *I was really hoping for young*

*love overcoming all odds*' (Tori Goodreads, emphasis mine). For this reader, the typical satisfaction in the theme of 'love conquers all' culminating in a happy ending in romance novels, as discussed in Chapter One, is lost because Jesse and Emily's differences are irreconcilable. In participating in the genre, George manipulates reader expectations to communicate a different message: one focused on self-love (*philautia*) rather than romantic love (*eros*). This move is a positive one for a different reviewer who gave the novel 'four stars' because she was pleased with George's implicit ideology: '*The Difference Between You and Me* isn't a romance so don't go into it expecting one. It's an intelligent story about a girl struggling to figure out who she is in a unique situation' (Lori (Pure Imagination) Goodreads). While the reviewer cautions future readers against expectations for a romance, her comment nonetheless highlights George's deliberate use of this romance convention and how she shifts the expectations of a 'happy ending' from a romance to self-empowerment. The themes of romance and activism may attract different sets of readers who are looking for those narratives individually, but there will also be some readers who are satisfied with both aspects of the novel.

The conflict between Jesse and Emily also extends to their personal identities in addition to their political beliefs. As detailed earlier, Jesse is already out as a lesbian—to herself, her family and friends, and publically—before the novel begins and so the narrative is not built around her coming out story. Emily acknowledges her non-heteronormativity and attraction to Jesse in her opening monologue, but the tone of her first-person narration raises questions about the level to which Emily wants to publicise this aspect of her identity. She tells the reader: 'Some people might say I'm bisexual and the only reason I *wouldn't* say that is because I don't believe in labels of any kind' (George 17). Emily clarifies that, when it comes to dating, 'it's about the person' for her, not about labels (17). Emily's act of forgoing sexual identity labels can be read as a

queer act that challenges the binary positions implied by labels such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual; however, the implication is that Emily is aware that she is attracted to more than one sex, and may in fact believe ‘bisexual’ is an accurate definition of her sexual identity, but that to openly admit this fact to herself or another person would shatter her carefully curated public image. The emphasis on the word ‘*wouldn’t*’ justifies her actions and intends to make the reader believe she is a strong, moral person; whereas if the emphasis was on the ‘I’ just before, it would make Emily appear as if she were weak and prejudiced, fearful of coming out. When Emily continues her monologue, she emphasises that she has a ‘responsibility to be sort of the public face of the school’ and that she *cannot* do whatever she wants because she has ‘to think about [her] public persona’ (18-19). The result then is that the issue is not that Emily is attracted to both boys and girls, but that she is attracted to—and in love with—Jesse Halberstam, a person whose public persona is antithetical to Emily’s perfect one. Juxtaposed in this way, George shifts the narrative expectation from whether or not Emily will come out as bisexual (or another non-heteronormative identity category) to whether she will ‘come out’ as loving a ‘Weirdo’ like Jesse. Emily’s decision thus becomes a choice between ‘normalcy’ and ‘weirdness’, an implicit reference back to the social dichotomy raised in the opening NOLAW manifesto.

The tension between Jesse and Emily’s political beliefs and personal identities is complicated by their desire for one another, as demonstrated in their kissing scenes throughout the narrative. As outlined in Chapter One, the first kiss scene tends to operate as a catalyst for self-reflection in terms of identity construction. When the narrative begins, Jesse and Emily have been meeting for over a year in the local library’s second-floor, disabled bathroom to kiss for ten minutes every Tuesday. By not focusing on their first kiss, George redirects the readers’ attention to the fact that these brief weekly intervals of kissing are the extent of their relationship; Emily refuses to

acknowledge Jesse outside of the perimeters of this particular bathroom. Although their relationship takes place behind closed doors, their desire for one another is ardent.

Emily's experience of kissing is related first in the novel:

When Jesse Halberstam kisses me, she's really focused and really intense. [...] and somehow, just by the way she touches me, she makes my mouth open, she makes my eyes close, she makes me breathe faster and faster until I feel dizzy and I think I might black out. Sometimes when she's kissing me, I swear to God, the edges of my body melt and I become sort of part of her. Sometimes when she kisses me I forget my own name (21).

Emily narrates the overwhelming and dizzy feeling of being touched and kissed by Jesse. Her language is focused on physical responses of her body, until the language morphs into hyperbole as she loses her sense of self—forgetting her own name and physically disappearing into the body of her lover. This lust-filled description paints a picture of *eros*: a love that can possess a person in 'a dangerous, fiery and irrational form of love' (Krzmaric 5). The narrator describes Jesse's all-encompassing sense of *eros* in various ways throughout the novel, but particularly in the narrator's description of Jesse kissing Emily:

Kissing Emily is literally the best thing Jesse has ever done. In her life. There is no feeling more right or more perfect than the feeling of having Emily in her arms. It makes Jesse feel larger than life—superpowerful—to touch this girl and be touched by her. [...] When Jesse is kissing Emily, it is all she wants to do for as long as she lives. The kissing becomes her first and last name, her only skill, the reason she was born and the way she wants to die (George 76-77).

Like Emily, Jesse's *eros*-fuelled 'superpowerful' feelings are focalised through the sensation of touch on the body. The narrator also frames Jesse's *eros* in similarly charged language to the NOLAW manifesto: dramatic sweeping statements, singular



focus, and the confirmation of life-affirming choices and the threat of death without such a life source. The *eros* between the two female characters—their passion and lust for one another—is depicted as required, equal in intensity. Unlike the first kiss scenes examined in this thesis, Jesse and Emily’s on-going kissing scenes do not reveal a new sense of identity in terms of sexuality. Instead, their individual experiences of kissing each other offer a contrasting image to the characters’ ‘Weirdo’ and ‘perfect’ public personas, provoking the reader to wonder which version of each character is true.

What is at stake for Jesse and Emily in this YA novel is the difference between the strength of their desire for one another and the struggle to remain true to who they believe themselves to be. This is a difference, I argue, between fear and self-love (*philautia*). For Emily, the ‘true’ her is the conservative, small-town sweetheart who has a long-term boyfriend and is vice president of student council. Operating from a position of fear instead of self-love, Emily concedes that kissing Jesse is only acceptable in secret because her *eros* for Jesse is not greater than her love for the ‘Emily Miller’ she believes herself to be. For Jesse, their relationship is an issue of integrity for two separate reasons. First, Jesse wants to be ‘out’ in their relationship and she attempts to vocalise this disconnect between her principles and her complicity in their secrecy by asking Emily to come out. When Emily refuses, Jesse continues with their kissing sessions because her *eros* appears to be too strong to overcome. Second, by the resolution of the novel, Jesse accepts that she has fallen in love with someone who ‘is against everything I stand for’ politically (210). In her final scene with Emily, Jesse declines the opportunity to reinstate their Tuesday kissing arrangement, stating that she does not ‘feel like hiding anymore’ and that she wants to put her ‘energy into other things’ (253) about which she is passionate. While the novel’s resolution does not depict the reconciliation of the central romantic couple, the narrative demonstrates how Jesse prioritises her feelings of *philautia* over her expression of *eros*, and suggests that

this is a ‘happy ending’, too. Jesse’s identity—from her sexuality to her politics—is more complete at the end of the novel than at the beginning because she has fully claimed her ‘weirdness’, as set out in the NOLAW manifesto, in all aspects of her life. With its resolution, the narrative shifts the expectations of the lesbian YA romance novel and offers an alternative to the love story, one that portrays a journey towards self-love for the lesbian protagonist. George’s message is clear: the revolution starts with the individual, with self-love.

Starting with the inclusion of the NOLAW manifesto, *The Difference Between You and Me* outlines a ‘call to action’ and raises questions of justice, liberation, equality, and love for the reader to consider. The theme of activism is woven throughout the novel, from the manifesto to Jesse and Esther’s demonstrations against StarMart to the conflict between Jesse and Emily’s political beliefs. Combining the two themes of activism and romance, George’s novel works through a particular ‘what if?’ question: what if you fall in love with someone who ‘is against everything [you] stand for’ (210)? At the outset, the novel appears to be a conventional attraction of opposites between Jesse and Emily, a generic expectation that George uses to her advantage, but ultimately Jesse chooses self-love (*philautia*) over passionate love (*eros*) because what she stands for is more important. As discussed, the reader may or may not agree—or be happy with—this resolution, but the narrative does provoke the reader’s engagement in the thought experiment and invites them to ask what they would do in Jesse’s shoes or in their own hometown. As Jesse moves forward with NOLAW and joins Esther in SPAN, the final theme of *agape* is demonstrated once more in the novel. This is because Jesse does not merely chose herself over Emily, in a display of *philautia* as narcissism; she also chooses her passion for creating a better world for everyone, but especially ‘All Weirdos’. Her sense of *agape* drives almost everything Jesse does in the novel, and it is this form of love that is most evident in *Ask the Passengers* as well, the YA novel to be

discussed in the following section. While the protagonist's actions in King's novel do not take the form of activism, the narrative offers another depiction of the capacity for and the willingness to share a deep love for humanity.

### **Love Distributed – *Ask the Passengers***

*ASTRID JONES SENDS HER LOVE.*

*Every airplane, no matter how far it is up there, I send love to it. I picture the people in their seats with their plastic cups of soda or orange juice or Scotch, and I love them. I really love them. I send a steady, visible stream of it—love—from me to them. From my chest to their chests. From my brain to their brains. It's a game I play. [...]*

*Because if I give it all away, then no one can control it.*

*Because if I give it all away, I'll be free (King 1).*

Love is the central theme of *Ask the Passengers* by A.S. King. Narrated by high school student and protagonist Astrid Jones and set in the small town of Unity Valley, Pennsylvania, the novel is constructed around the central premise of loving and being loved. The prologue describes the game Astrid frequently plays, where she sends her love to the passengers flying in the airplanes that pass overhead. This game is 'an outpouring' of unconditional love from Astrid, to the passengers and, increasingly, to those she encounters in her daily life, that is founded in *agape*, her love for humanity. In a peritextual interview included in the paperback edition of the YA novel, King states that she wanted to ground Astrid's action in universal 'human love', rather than 'romantic or sexual love', because '[w]e all need it, whether we get it or not' (298). With her novel, King intended to demonstrate 'the effect that love can have on a

human' (298). 'Wouldn't it be a far more fabulous world,' King asks in the interview, 'if people loved random other people? If we sent love to random strangers?' (298). Generically, the novel utilises elements of magic realism to portray the effects of loving random strangers by portraying love as a physical force as well as an action and emotion experienced by the protagonist and the passengers. Astrid's game is not altogether altruistic, though, as it is partly in response to the complex conditions placed on the love in her intimate relationships with family and friends (*philia*). Over the course of the novel, Astrid must learn to reconcile these two areas of her life in order to fully understand her capacity for love. King constructs an additional relationship in the narrative through the central romantic couple of Astrid and love interest Dee Roberts, who demonstrate both *eros* and *ludus* in their scenes together. Their same-sex relationship also raises questions of identity for Astrid, and everyone else in her life.

Literally invoking the Socratic method, the narrative employs magic realism to create the imaginary figure of Socrates, nicknamed Frank Socrates, who encourages Astrid (and, possibly, the reader) to seek the truth—not just in her questions about love and identity, but in everything she does. Rather than simply asking philosophically motivated questions, King's YA novel places philosophy at its centre in its consideration of love as a *force* in the lives of human beings. To borrow from Hollindale, *Ask the Passengers* asks 'questions about *Homo sapiens*' (85) that are intended to challenge the reader's conceptualisation of human relationships. This section will begin with a brief overview of magic realism before discussing the impact love has in the narrative between Astrid and the passengers, and then Astrid and her *philia* relationships. The analysis will then shift to examine the central romantic relationship between the protagonist and love interest, its impact on constructions of identity, and the influence of an imaginary Greek philosopher on the text. By participating in the generic conventions of magic realism, King's narrative works to

expand the potential and possibilities of love, beyond the singular focus of a romantic relationship in the traditional romance narrative. The closer Astrid wanders towards her own truth—about herself, her identity, her love—the more she is required (and the reader invited) to wonder about the formation and conditions of love.

King achieves this ideological aim, in part, by incorporating generic conventions associated with magic realism in her narrative. The genre of magic realism is generally acknowledged as originating in Latin America, notably defined by works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez and *The House of Spirits* (1982) by Isabel Allende (Arellano, 2015; Danow, 2015; Waller, 2008), but Kimberley Reynolds argues that ‘the roots of magic(al) realism lie in children’s literature’ as literature that ‘can now be recognised as magic(al) realist’, such as *Mary Poppins* (1934) by P.L. Travers, was written before the South American movement (Reynolds 20-21); King’s YA novel demonstrates a greater relationship with the tropes used in magic realist children’s literature than the novels of García Márquez, Allende, and others. Alison Waller states that the genre of magic realism incorporates ‘impossible happenings’—such as the physical transfer of an emotion from one character to another, for example—‘into a worldview that the characters—if not the reader—find natural or acceptable’ (21). In LGBTQ YA literature, David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) is frequently noted as a work of magic realism (Crisp, 2009; Cart & Jenkins, 2006). With its depiction of the inclusive ‘Joy Scouts’, a drag queen football quarterback, and a biker cheerleading team, to name a few narrative elements, the small town setting of *Boy Meets Boy* can be read as an impossible ‘homotopia’ in conservative Middle America in the early 2000s. In *Ask the Passengers*, Astrid does not find it strange that she can send her love to others. The passengers who receive it, if surprised, accept the event as a possibility within their lived experience. No character offers an explanation of how this transaction might be possible, but it is part of their worldview. The intention

of employing magic realism is to ‘attempt to transcend the restrictions of the mundane and commonsensical’ (Reynolds 20) by incorporating the ‘marvellous’ (Arellano xiv) into the worldbuilding of the narrative. In *Ask the Passengers*, Astrid endeavours to assimilate the ‘marvellous’ quality of her love into the ‘mundane’ of her daily life. Equally, the narrative interjects the marvellous by incorporating ‘impossible happenings’, such as the figure of a classical Greek philosopher sharing his love of pancakes whilst also morally guiding the teenage protagonist, or the individual passengers feeling the physical impact of Astrid’s love from the ground while flying at 30,000 feet in the air. Similar to the function of generic conventions in science fiction and fantasy, the elements of magic realism in King’s novel highlight particular philosophical questions and invite the reader to consider their own answers.

In the prologue, King lays the foundation for her generic engagement with magic realism by Astrid poetically describing this act of loving as sending ‘a steady, visible stream’ of love ‘[from] my chest to their chests. From my brain to their brains’ (1). On one hand, her description could be read as a metaphor for the ability to maintain an emotional state for a set duration of time, such as the length of time of the passing of an airplane. On the other hand, Astrid’s corporeal descriptions infer earnestness in her endeavours as she communicates the experience of the game in the language of the physical body, in the humanness of herself and the passengers. The language attempts to ground her actions in the concrete as well as suggest the possibility of the concrete: that Astrid sends her love as a literal ‘steady, visible stream’. As proof of this physical force, King incorporates the reactions and responses of the unknowing passengers into the narrative. Nine of the novel’s chapters are intersected by two- to three-page passages that are narrated by each individual passenger who receives Astrid’s love. These interludes are signalled visually for the reader with a change in font and format. The sections are headed with the passenger’s details—passenger number, name, seat

number, flight number, and departure and arrival destinations—and begin *in media res*. In the first such interlude, passenger Heidi Klein, a nineteen-year-old university student, describes how ‘something crazy hits [her]’ before she spontaneously tells her boyfriend that she loves him ‘without any reason to’, as if she was not ‘in control of [her] mouth or something’ (20). In a subsequent interlude, First Class passenger Elaine Hubbington also describes feeling the physical impact of Astrid’s love: ‘Call it a moment of clarity. Call it a message from God. I stare out the window at the sky and feel this *smack* of reality right in my heart’ (39, emphasis mine). Another passenger describes the physical sensation of Astrid’s love as going ‘over one of those hills in a car, at just the right speed’ (100), whilst an additional passenger observes that it seemed as if all the passengers on his flight were ‘possessed by something we will never understand’ (127). King’s descriptions of the physical impact of Astrid’s love defy the laws of physics, but their tangibility is not the question being put forward by the novel. By repeatedly interrupting the narrative with these ‘marvellous’ moments, King invites the reader to consider the centrality and power of love as a force for change.

For the majority of the novel, Astrid’s relationship with the random strangers in the airplanes is one-sided, but King alters this format for a specific purpose with the last passenger interlude in the final chapter. Here, teenage passenger Jessica Kimball is being flown to a ‘gay conversion’ camp (conversion therapy) to ‘cure’ her of homosexuality after her relationship with girlfriend Marie is discovered by her parents. Jessica feels trapped in her situation, both in her window seat within the plane and by the gravity of her destination, but she is resolved to stay true to herself. Jessica decides to protect her love for Marie by sending it to a random stranger on the ground below, where Astrid just happens to be sitting with her girlfriend Dee. Jessica explains her mental process of sending her love:

I wrap my love for Marie into a tight ball of mental swaddling. I wrap it in a soft flannel blanket, four, ten, a hundred times. I wrap it so well that nothing can hurt it. And then I look out the window and down at the green-and-brown landscape, and I toss my love to whoever might be there to keep it safe (292).

Unlike Astrid, Jessica does not describe sending her love as a ‘stream’ or ‘an outpouring’, but rather as an object in need of safekeeping. In the passage, Astrid feels the impact of it and describes the sensation: ‘I try to think of what just happened, but I can’t explain it. All I know is that a huge, overwhelming feeling of love has just landed in my heart, and I have to keep it safe for a while’ (292). This moment functions in two ways within the narrative. First, during the previous passenger interludes, a sceptical reader may have doubted the physicality of Astrid’s love on the random strangers flying overhead by dismissing the narrative moments as coincidence rather than an element of magic realism in the novel. By introducing a second character whose love is also received as a physical and emotional experience, King offers further confirmation of the ‘impossible’ communication between Astrid and the passengers. Second, King contrasts Astrid’s positive resolution with Jessica’s situation in a way that draws attention to the harmful and on-going practice of conversion therapy as well as the stark reality that many family members of LGBTQ young adults may not be as accepting of non-heteronormative identities and relationships. Astrid implicitly understands the weight of the situation and responds to Jessica with *agape*: ‘I look at the plane, and I send my love. *Don’t worry. I’ll keep it safe. Stay strong*’ (293). In this way, King gives the final passenger’s experience a hopeful outcome: if Jessica is forced to attend a gay conversion camp at least her love for Marie is safe with a random stranger within the larger *agape*-filled community to which she belongs, and maybe that will give her the strength to stay true to herself.



Outside of her momentary and anonymous relationships with the passengers, Astrid's game serves different purposes when she initiates sending her love to individuals face-to-face. In the prologue, Astrid alludes to a recent shift in the recipients of her love, from airplane passengers to random people 'everywhere now' (1). The examples she provides at the outset of the novel maintain that this game is an exploration of cultivating unconditional love for humanity. However, as the novel progresses it becomes clear that the intention behind the gesture can vary depending on the context and recipient. Sporadically, Astrid breaks from her narration to mentally send her love to the person with whom she is speaking. This is illustrated in the novel through the italicisation of the text and with a shift in tone, often from earnestness to self-deprecating or cutting humour. This first thing the reader may notice is that this action does not carry with it the same magic realist qualities suggested in the passenger interludes: none of the face-to-face recipients acknowledge or betray any awareness of receiving Astrid's love in this form. Furthermore, these moments are not completely founded in the distribution of *agape*, but motivated by the dynamics of Astrid's interpersonal relationships and/or relationship to herself. For example, when Astrid meets an older lesbian dressed in biker clothing on her first visit to a gay bar, she is grateful to the woman for interacting with her. Astrid feels vulnerable in the space and embarrassed by her robot-like dancing, but she begins to feel more comfortable as the two women talk. Thus, Astrid decides to send her love: '*Biker Lady, I love you for talking to me right now. Time is moving so much faster because you're talking, and I need that because I just discovered I'm a robot*' (71). While the woman is a practical stranger to Astrid, the sentiment expressed is more representative of a love of friendship, *philia*, than a general sense of *agape*. The gesture is also motivated by gratitude to a specific person rather than a randomised 'outpouring' of love to a stranger.

Operating at a further remove from her game with the passengers, Astrid also sends her love to people with whom she has strained, intimate relationships. During a dinnertime scene in the second chapter of the novel, a conflict arises between Astrid and her mother, which prompts Astrid to respond internally: ‘Instead of replying with my usual open-your-mind speech, I send my love to my mother. *Mom, I love you even though you’re a critical, unforgiving horror show. This casserole sucks, but I like the way you roasted the walnuts*’ (15). The power of Astrid’s loving sentiment towards her mother is undermined by her biting humour (rather than the self-deprecating humour used in the previous example, which creates empathy). The reader is intended to sympathise with Astrid as her mother criticises her in this scene, but also to understand that their relationship is complicated by a difference in worldview and expectation. While Astrid strives to send her love unconditionally to everyone in the novel, there are characters with whom she struggles to cultivate that experience—not just her mother, but also her father, sister, and best friend Kristina. These moments focalise Astrid’s wondering about love through the lens of her interpersonal relationships, exposing for the reader the contrast between the expectations for the general sharing of *agape* with the expression of *philia* for friends and family.

The one person that Astrid does not secretly send her love to is her girlfriend Dee, but it is through their relationship that King interweaves an exploration of additional types of love—*eros* and *ludus*—and provokes questions of autonomy for Astrid (and the reader). Like Malinda Lo’s science fiction YA novels analysed in Chapter Three and the other YA novels examined in this chapter, the act of kissing is a way into understanding the dynamics of the central romantic relationship. Within two lines of Dee’s introduction into the novel, the two young women kiss, but Astrid playfully informs the reader that that is not their ‘first kiss’ (31). The scene may surprise the reader, though, because there is little reference to Astrid’s desire, sexuality, or

romantic relationships in the previous chapters, and the statement denies the narrative element of the first kiss that is central to the construction of the lesbian YA romance novel. Similar to Jesse and Emily in *The Difference Between You and Me*, however, the primary shared activity of kissing elucidates other issues to be addressed. Throughout the novel, Astrid expresses her reluctance to advance the sexual aspect of her relationship with Dee beyond kissing. On the one hand, Astrid wonders how much she wants to engage sexually in general, questioning whether or not she may identify as asexual (95, 122). On the other, the relationship reveals an imbalance between Astrid and Dee's desires and communication skills. As their relationship develops, Astrid defends the limits of her willingness to have sex for the first time against Dee's (sometimes aggressive) advances. The scenes in question are not abusive or violent, but King does portray the pitfalls of not communicating—or not yet having the language to communicate—sexual desires (for Dee) and limits (for Astrid). The two characters eventually confront the issue through conversation and this results in the establishment of a code word: '*abracadabra*' (130). The code word allows for Astrid to signal when she wants to advance their sexual relationship and, until whenever that might be, Dee agrees to respect her girlfriend's decision and body autonomy (and vice versa). Through these intimate conversations, King invites the reader to consider physical intimacy not as an inherent by-product of *eros*, but as one act of loving another person. When Astrid does use '*abracadabra*' in the narrative, Dee's response illustrates how Astrid's boundaries are beneficial to both partners in the relationship: Dee communicates that she does not want to rush into having sex; instead, she wants to 'have fun and fall in love' because she 'never took a minute to really just relax and feel loved', a reflection of *ludus* (265). In this scene, King iterates her challenge to the reader to consider how love and physical intimacy operate within an intimate, romantic relationship as well as demonstrates how a relationship can move from the more 'dangerous' *eros* to playful

*ludus*, setting the foundations for *pragma*. By illustrating the communication and boundary issues in Astrid and Dee's relationship, King is also offering the reader an instructive perspective on 'ways of being and behaving' (Betz 15) in a romantic relationship (same-sex or opposite-sex), rather than simply portraying the act of falling in love as offered by many of the lesbian YA romance novels discussed in earlier chapters.

Astrid's romantic relationship with Dee also raises questions of identity for the protagonist, an on-going discussion in the narrative that King explores through an engagement with philosophy and the deployment of the figure of Frank Socrates. Throughout the novel, *Ask the Passengers* relies heavily on the Socratic method—asking questions and considering the truthfulness of answers. For example, when Dee challenges Astrid to claim a sexual identity, Astrid responds by stating that that is 'a question [she is] answering' to which she does not yet have an answer (124). Astrid is enrolled in a high school philosophy class in the novel and she takes great inspiration from Socrates. As a character, Frank often appears in scenes of reflection or intense conversation—in school, kitchens, cars, or outdoors—and King does not fully clarify whether Frank is actually there or only a figment of Astrid's imagination. Astrid relies on his presence—and the philosophical teachings of Socrates—to wonder about her identity instead of questioning his 'marvellous' existence. As the pressure to come out increases from Dee, her parents, and Kristina, Astrid gives voice to her wonderings about identity in a conversation with her dad:

"When I told you I didn't know if I was gay, I was telling you the truth. I just know I'm in love—with a girl. I had no idea of anything past that. It's very Socrates, you know? I'm not questioning *my* sexuality as much as I'm questioning the strict definitions and boxes of all *sexualities* and why we care so much about other people's intimate business" (256).

The self-reflective journey that Astrid has been on has not been within her romantic relationship with Dee, but in her head. This aspect of *Ask the Passengers* mirrors Sorenson's observation that the 'wanderings' of young adults is primarily a mental process, and that it has the potential to 'expand the range' of the species—here, in the consideration of sexualities. As an adolescent novel of ideas, King balances the truth of Astrid's circumstances—she is in love with a girl—with a greater question about sexual identity in general. Ultimately, Astrid declares the closest thing she can to her truth: “‘So, I’m gay. Until further notice’ (257). In her statement, Astrid leaves room for the conditional nature of her truth while at the same time acknowledging that ‘strict definitions and boxes’ (256) can be helpful in making herself intelligible to others. King interweaves this philosophical discussion into the narrative through the generic engagement with magic realism, conjuring Frank as a helpful friend who guides Astrid through her wondering. When she no longer requires his assistance, he decides to quietly disappear as he ‘takes a drink from the water fountain, readjusts his toga, and walks out the front doors’ (252). Astrid notices his absence a few days later when she fails to ‘make him show up again’, commenting that he probably ‘think(s) I don’t need him anymore. He’s probably right’ (274). The overall discussion of Astrid’s sexuality in the novel stems from her first same-sex relationship, not unlike the lesbian YA romance novels examined in Chapter One and Chapter Two. However, King’s novel shifts the focus away from the confirmation of identity through the romantic relationship and onto the role that *love* plays in the formation of sexuality, encouraging the reader to engage in a larger philosophical discussion about love, truth, and categorical identities.

Throughout Astrid’s journey to find her truth, love remains her focus. The central romantic relationship with Dee is one aspect of the narrative but it is not the sole story about love. Rather, King’s novel portrays multiple kinds of love and demonstrates how they operate in different relationships—with strangers, family members, friends,

romantic partners, and the self. As reconciliation is reached within each of Astrid's intimate relationships, her 'marvellous' impulse to physically send her love to the passengers reaches equilibrium with her love for those in her immediate community, and she begins to re-envision her 'outpouring' of love as a multi-directional disbursement rather than a one-way vertical distribution. Throughout the narrative, the implied reader wanders with Astrid through her mental process as she wonders what love means to her. The narrative introduces the reader to the philosophy through the figure of Socrates and his temporary but 'impossible' presence in Astrid's life, emphasising the search for truth through various whispered teachings: 'I look at Frank Socrates, and he says, in my head, *Settle for nothing less than the truth. Even if the answer is I don't know*' (202). It is the inclusion of Socrates and philosophy that also widens the implied readership of *Ask the Passengers*, inviting readers who may be questioning their sexuality or who may just generally be interested in asking questions about love and life. The passenger interludes provide an additional focus on love as they interject the narrative with voices from various walks of life, inviting the reader to consider the potential impact different kinds of love can have on the lives of human beings. King's novel works through the particular premise of sending love to random strangers and the result is a narrative that 'expands the range' of lesbian YA novels with its portrayal on multiple love stories as well as expanding the readership for YA novels with LGBTQ characters. In the following, final section, I will focus on Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* as it records two love stories in tandem: the history of the protagonist's relationship with her deceased parents and her coming of age through ephemeral romantic relationships. For the young protagonist of this YA novel, love is something to be given away, but to be reclaimed.

## **Wandering to Love – *The Miseducation of Cameron Post***

The ‘Big Sky Country’ of Eastern Montana in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth provides a landscape against which the novel’s eponymous protagonist’s experimentations with love are written. Grief and desire are the central themes that run through Cameron’s first-person narrative as she reconstructs the story of her adolescence from a temporal distance. The historical novel set between 1989-1993, recreates a time capsule of summers in the rural American West: afternoons swimming in the lake, renting VHS tapes from the local video store, drinking ice cold sodas, playing Truth or Dare to pass the time. The setting amplifies Cameron’s isolation, reflecting the loneliness that many real-life young adults questioning their sexuality feel when growing up in the country, especially before access to other communities was made easier through the Internet and mobile phones. The novel begins when Cameron is twelve years old: the year of her parents’ fatal car crash and her first kiss with a girl. The non-linear narrative jumps from summer to summer as Cameron wonders about her place in the world, both as an orphan and as a girl who loves girls. When the final section shifts from summertime to the 1992-1993 school year, Danforth requires the reader to engage with the proposition of being sent to a conversion therapy school, God’s Promise, for the ‘sin’ of homosexuality. This section will begin with a brief overview of historical fiction, suggesting how *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* participates in genre and situating it within the field of lesbian historical fiction. My analysis will follow the two thematic threads of the YA novel—desire and grief—using the novel’s opening line as a starting point for examining Cameron’s multiple first kiss scenes and the novel’s resolution. Danforth’s novel is permeated by the absence of love: Cameron spends the length of the novel wondering how to reconcile the loss of parental love with her desire for romantic love as the narrative wanders through different

moments on her journey from adolescence to adulthood. The reader is invited to wander across these physical and internal landscapes with her, as a witness to her courage and strife.

*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* participates in the historical genre in a way that, Mandy Koolen suggests, '[speculates] about past experiences of same-sex desire' (373). Danforth achieves this, in part, by grounding the narrative in the ordinariness of Cameron's experiences of the late 1980s and early 1990s as she navigates her relationships in her hometown and at the conversion therapy programme. The narrative seeks to draw attention to the existence and experiences of teenage lesbians growing up during this recent period, particularly in the rural United States and socially conservative states like Montana, and the isolation or consequences they might have faced as a result of their geographical or political contexts. This intention is evident in the work of Sarah Waters, critically-acclaimed historical fiction author, whose novels, such as *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *The Night Watch* (2006), 'offer a "way back" to an occluded lesbian past' (Alden "'Accompanied'" 61), exploring questions of gender, identity, and community during the Victorian period and World War II. Natasha Alden argues that, through her novels, Waters 'seeks to reclaim lost or silenced history, using history, self-consciously and often humorously, to teasingly reassemble a literary simulacrum of a lost archive' ("Possibility" 83). This literary act, in turn, offers the reader the opportunity to 'understand [their] relationship to that archive' ("Accompanied" 75-76). In YA literature, a few authors, in addition to Danforth, have chosen to set their novels within a particular historical period in order demonstrate that young lesbian and bisexual women and their same-sex relationships existed in these times and spaces. *Silhouette of a Sparrow* (2012) by Molly Beth Griffin is set in 1926 in Minnesota and features a middle class girl falling in love with a flapper dance hall performer during her summer holiday. *Lies We Tell Ourselves* (2014) by Robin Talley



portrays the interracial love story between two young women in Virginia in 1959 during the desegregation of their school by court order. First published in the UK, *Wildthorn* (1999) by Jane Eagland transports young adult readers to a Victorian asylum (a setting similar to Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002)) where a wrongly committed female patient falls in love with a female nurse within the facility. Like *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, each of the YA novels reclaims teenage lesbian voices and experiences—of flappers in the Roaring Twenties, desegregation during the Civil Rights Movement, and the treatment of homosexuality as a medical condition in the late nineteenth century—as part of history by '[reassembling] a literary simulacrum of a lost archive' (Alden "Possibility" 83). Danforth's novel highlights the realities LGBTQ youth in rural, conservative areas in a pre-digital age, where the few stories that represented their experiences (including YA novels, as discussed in the Introduction) were likely to be difficult to access or not available.

In addition, Koolen suggests that 'historical fiction may use the past to comment on issues of contemporary concern and, by establishing temporal distances between readers and characters, make difficult social critiques more likely to be heard and taken seriously' (372). *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* explicitly and implicitly comments on two issues affecting LGBTQ young adults that may be of concern to contemporary readers. First, Danforth is clear in her position *against* gay conversion therapy programmes, which she demonstrates through the second half of the novel when Cameron is forcibly enrolled at the religious-based school of God's Promise by her evangelical aunt and guardian. Conversion therapy programmes are more widely discussed in the twenty-first century because they are now publically considered harmful to the individuals who undergo the counselling (with some US states, as well as countries internationally, legislating against conversion therapy); however, little was known about their practices in the early 1990s outside of some evangelical

communities. Danforth's novel asks the reader to recognise this experience as one facet of the treatment of LGBTQ people in US history. Second, more implicit, the novel writes homosexuality and same-sex relationships onto the rural American landscape, where presumed heterosexuality dominates socio-cultural perceptions. The film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) overtly aimed to break this perception with its story of two men falling in love in rural Wyoming, and the controversies around its nationwide release demonstrated the resistance to this artistic reclamation of 'lost or silenced history' (Alden "'Possibility'" 83) for the American West. In YA literature, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz seeks a similar objective for the Southern US with its portrayal of the romantic relationship between two teenage Mexican-American boys outside of El Paso, Texas in 1987. This hesitancy to recognise the presence of LGBTQ people in these spaces continues to be reflected in the scarcity of YA novels set in rural areas in the contemporary US: they are fewer than those set in urban and suburban areas, as discussed in Chapter One—novels such as *Far From You* (2014) by Tess Sharpe and *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit* (2016) by Jaye Robin Brown are notable exceptions. The concern addressed by these narratives, along with Danforth's novel, is not so much a singular issue, such as conversion therapy, as it is a contemporary and continuing critique on the heteronormative construction of the perception of rural communities and the individuals who live there. Danforth's novel suggests that teenagers like Cameron are present in those spaces in general, but are particularly worthy of attention prior to the technological revolution and the burgeoning acceptance of LGBTQ people in the twenty-first century.

The opening line of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*—'The afternoon my parents died, I was out shoplifting with Irene Klauson' (Danforth 3)—sets the tone for the novel by immediately contrasting disparate subjects and taboos. On initial reading,

the sentence delivers a set of basic information: there are three subjects to be considered—Cameron (the narrator), her parents, and Irene Klauson—as well as two actions—the death of Cameron’s parents and the act of shoplifting. Given the subject matter and the age of the first-person narrator, the reader might expect the sentence’s emphasis to be on the parents’ death, a devastating event that orphans Cameron; however, the syntax of the sentence emphasises the action related to Irene. The subordinate clause—‘the afternoon my parents died’ (3)—is used instead to temporally locate the narrator. What is important is that Cameron shoplifted in the afternoon (as a time of day) and that it happened to be the same day that her parents died. The information about the parents’ death is provided *as context* for the action in the main clause, an event that is relevant because it was undertaken with a particular individual: Irene. From the outset of the novel, Irene is a key figure in Cameron’s life. She is Cameron’s childhood best friend with whom she enjoys a carefree existence during the summer months of her childhood, *and* she and Cameron share their first kiss the day before the car accident. The narrator does not highlight the act of kissing in the first sentence of the novel, but she does implicitly foreground Cameron’s preoccupation with same-sex attractions by juxtaposing the two key life events. Cameron inherently links her parents’ death with her romantic and sexual desires from the beginning of the narrative. The final action in the sentence—shoplifting—is casually included, as if two adolescents by stealing from a shop have not just committed a crime. This action—Cameron taking bubble gum on a dare—is another secret Cameron carries and it foreshadows the secrecy surrounding many of her activities throughout the novel. In grief or desire, Cameron experiments with various ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15) when no one is watching.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Cameron experiences her first kiss when Irene dares her to kiss her, a playful form of experimentation. For Cameron, this moment

becomes the foundation for the consideration of her sexual identity and the scene is referred back to throughout her narration. As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, Laura Goode's *Sister Mischief* (2011) also includes a light-hearted first kiss in the novel, but that act is motivated by the protagonist's desire to confirm her lesbian identity for herself through the knowledge of kissing a girl (on whom she happens to have a crush). In Danforth's novel, Irene and Cameron do not have the language to articulate why kissing a girl feels like a risk worthy of a dare or why they have a desire to go through with the act. The first kiss takes place in Irene's family barn, the evening before Cameron's parents' death, and the protagonist relates the experience to the reader:

So I did it right then, before we had to talk about it anymore or Irene's mom called out to us to get ourselves washed up for dinner. There's nothing to know about a kiss like that before you do it. It was all action and reaction, the way her lips were salty and she tasted like root beer. The way I felt sort of dizzy the whole time (Danforth 10).

The description of the kiss is vague, but it does convey a sense of being overwhelmed on Cameron's behalf as she tries to piece together the experience using sensory details, such as taste and physical sensation. There is also the suggestion that Cameron has gained some kind of new knowledge from 'a kiss like that' as the description frames the moment into a before, where Cameron knows 'nothing', and an after. For this moment, Cameron exists in a 'dizzy' space of confusion, which is interrupted when Irene kisses her again. The second kiss changes the tone of the scene: Irene's action was not taken on a dare, but out of desire. The two girls do not frame their desire within a discussion of sexual identity, but it is expressed that they would like to kiss each other again.

Simultaneously, Cameron and Irene implicitly know that the act of two girls kissing is unacceptable within their community. Cameron narrates, '[...] even though no

one had ever told me, specifically, not to kiss a girl before, nobody had to. It was guys and girls who kissed—in our grade, on TV, in the movies, in the world; and that’s how it worked: guys and girls. Anything else was something weird’ (10-11). Cameron bases her observation of heteronormativity on two things: the people in her community and the visual media available to her. Unlike other lesbian YA novels, Danforth does not provide any older adult characters who might offer Cameron a template for various ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15) as a lesbian. (Some readers may read the character of Margot, Cameron’s mother’s best friend from childhood, as a lesbian, but Cameron does not make this implication or assertion at any point in the narrative.) In 1989, there would not have been examples of same-sex kisses between female characters for Cameron to access in television and film either: the first lesbian kiss on television was in 1991 (Bernard ‘Lesbian Kisses on American TV’) and lesbian characters were only depicted in independent films, such as *Bound* (1996), *Chasing Amy* (1997), and *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999), during the 1990s. Without examples or knowledge of same-sex relationships, Cameron is left to wonder about what her new feelings mean and how to rely on her own experiences, through experimentation, to build her understanding of her sexual identity.

The depiction of multiple first kiss scenes in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* provides the reader with a sense of Cameron’s ‘wandering’ development, both physically and emotionally. The YA novel allows Cameron to wander from relationship to relationship, not in a way that roughly discards love interests but one that acknowledges the passage of time in tandem with the development of the protagonist. In total, Cameron kisses five female characters—Irene, Lindsey, Coley, Mona, and Viking Erin—and one male character—Jamie—and each of these scenes is key to Cameron’s development. The experiences depicted span the summers between twelve and sixteen years old and range in feeling from friendship (*philia*) to sexual exploration (*ludus*) to

the all-consuming passion of first love (*eros*). For example, Cameron's experiences with Lindsey, her swimming teammate and second kissing partner, are marked by experimentation as the two teenagers explore their sexuality in physical terms. When the summer break is over, Cameron reflects on the meaningfulness of their relationship: 'What had seemed at first a revelation to me was that despite our ever-expanding make-out repertoire [...] I hadn't really fallen in love with Lindsey, and she hadn't with me; but we were okay with that, and liked each other maybe more for it' (Danforth 98-99). These scenes emphasise sexual exploration as a part of maturation as well as validate the depiction of an intimate relationship founded in *ludus* and *philia*, rather than just *eros*. Danforth utilises each first kiss scene to normalise different kinds of relationships and sexual encounters for the reader. After Irene and Lindsey, Cameron's experiences continue to diversify, from a passionate affair with Coley, to 'ten minutes of making out' with fellow lifeguard and college student Mona, to having sex with her roommate Viking Erin at God's Promise. Instead of focusing on a singular romantic love story for Cameron, Danforth demonstrates a lesbian protagonist's development in qualities of confidence and independence rather than rely on the achievement of a committed relationship to perform a similar role within the narrative. With each relationship or sexual encounter, Cameron gains from the experience and builds on her understanding of her identity. The novel's remembered coming-of-age narrative, as told in part through intimate relationships, is not a teleological progression of a single romance, but moments chosen to highlight the protagonist's emotional and physical development.

The language of the first kiss scenes functions to create a light-hearted connotation to Cameron's desire and sexuality that contrasts the dire experiences and consequences she faces in the narrative. Danforth's descriptions of these scenes particularly convey Cameron's sexual desire through language associated with innocence, often using a comparison to sweet flavours or commercial products

associated with childhood. In Cameron and Irene's first kiss scene, the central sensory detail is the sweetness of soda. Cameron recalls that Irene 'tasted like root beer' and describes how a yellow jacket flew over 'some spilled pop' (10). When they kiss again the next day, it is just after they have '[blown] stolen pink bubbles bigger than our heads' with the shoplifted gum (23). Danforth echoes these two tastes in the kissing scenes between Cameron and Coley, Cameron's first love. Reflecting on their first kiss, Cameron offers a sweetened assessment of the experience: 'I'm not gonna make it out to be something that it wasn't: It was perfect—Coley's soft lips against the bite of liquor and sugary Coke still on our tongues' (182). Later, when Cameron offers Coley 'orange Bubblicious' gum and Coley responds by kissing her, Cameron narrates: 'I had a sugar-crystally lump of not yet really chewed gum lodged in my molars and Coley's mouth was all over mine [...]' (199). By relying on saccharine descriptors of Cameron's sexual awakening, Danforth softens the female protagonist's desire through a lens of innocence; just as Lo does in *Adaptation*, with her reference to Amber's lip gloss tasting 'like candy' (*Adaptation* 145), and in *Huntress* (2010), with the metaphor of the 'sweetness in a drop of honey' (*Huntress* 1) used to convey Taisin's desire for Kaede. Sensory details are included in Cameron's 'first kiss' scenes with Lindsey and Viking Erin as well. From her first kiss with Lindsey, Cameron recalls that Lindsey's lips were 'frosted with sparkly orange-flavored lip gloss' (Danforth 97). The beauty product demonstrates Lindsey's interest in sexual maturity, but the qualities of sparkles and flavouring suggest a sustained level of immaturity as she and Cameron fumble through their make-out session. At God's Promise, when Erin wakes Cameron in the middle of the night from a sex dream, the narrator focuses on the smell of Erin's 'pink Johnson & Johnson baby lotion' (440-441), mentioned twice in the scene, a product associated with childhood. In addition, the description of Cameron's orgasm is focalised through the details of her physical assessment of Erin: her 'pillowy shoulders', small feet, golden-

coloured hair, and the smell of her shampoo (442). The repetition of the sugary descriptions and childhood products in the descriptions of Cameron's first kisses becomes a thread throughout the narrative, linking together her sexual experiences. These scenes are playful interludes within the narrative that is dominated by the consequences of the loss of Cameron's central loving relationship: her parents.

As the first chapter builds to towards the point where Cameron is told about parents' fatal car crash, Danforth continues to interweave the introductory threads of the impact of their deaths with Cameron's burgeoning sexuality. Mirroring the opening line of the novel, Cameron returns to the secrecy involved in kissing Irene, recalling that '[they were] drunk on [their] day together' and that they were 'still telling those secrets' (23) when the phone rings with the tragic news. Their illicit act is so all-encompassing that Cameron convinces herself 'beyond a doubt that Irene and [her] were found out' (28), rather than worry about any other consequences. Thus, when she learns her parents have died, Cameron's first response is not sadness or anger, but relief:

[...] and there had been an accident, and Mom and Dad, *my* mom and dad, had died, the first thing I thought, the very first thing, was: *She* [Grandma Post] *doesn't know about Irene and me at all. Nobody knows.* [...] I mean, I had to have known this big thing, this massive news about my whole entire world, but I just kept thinking, *Mom and Dad don't know about us. They don't know, so we're safe*—even though there was no more Mom and Dad to know about anything (29).

The relief is followed immediately by guilt: 'real, crushing guilt' about kissing a girl and at her first response being relieved that parents will never know that part of her. This emotion is followed by Cameron's suspicion that she is responsible for her parents' death as a result of her same-sex desires. Danforth sets up the central question of the novel by suggesting the following premise to the reader: what if your parents died



the day after you kissed a girl for the first time? Cameron fuses these two events together and this emotional response is sustained until the novel's resolution. During the first two summers, she copes with her grief by hiding the things with which she is preoccupied—her sexuality, her collage dollhouse project, her interest in films—and tries to shake off the belief that she caused her parents' death. She does not know how her parents' would have responded to her homosexuality and yet the question recurs after she is outed by Coley's brother in the third summer and sent for conversion therapy at God's Promise for the school year. She questions whether they loved her and if she was capable, as a child, to fully love them in return. To achieve reconciliation, Cameron must ultimately separate the grief of her parents' death from the construction of her sexual identity and claim that loving relationship (*philia*) as part of her life.

The resolution of the central love story within the narrative does not concern to any of Cameron's romantic relationships, but rather the reconciliation of her relationship with her parents. They are briefly described in the text, but their presence permeates the novel more as a spectre in the form of Quake Lake, the place of their car accident. Quake Lake is layered with stories and images of death from the outset of the novel with the physical location standing in for tragedy. Cameron does not wonder about what it means to have this lake play such an important role in her life events, but she does physically wander towards it as she seeks to resolve her grief and understand her identity. When Cameron and her classmates, Jane and Adam, run away from God's Promise at the end of the school year, the lake is their initial destination and first night's shelter. After reaching the shores of Quake Lake, an action she has dreamt of repeatedly in the narrative, Cameron knows she needs to 'go into the lake' (461). She performs an impromptu ritual as she swims out, naked, holding a single candle, and submerges herself repeatedly trying to conjure the memory of her parents. She then speaks out loud to them, working through her experiences of relief, guilt, and grief as connected to her

sexuality and the timing of their death. Towards the conclusion of her swim, Cameron tells them, ‘The thing is, pretty much everything that’s happened since you died has convinced me that I was lucky to have had you as my parents, even for only twelve years [...]. And I guess I just wanted to come here and say that I know that now, and I loved you [...].’ (468-469). In terms of a key narrative element, Cameron’s baptism in Quake Lake is the resolution of the central *philia* relationship; however, Danforth’s narrative does not offer a satisfactory ‘happy ending’. Cameron and her parents cannot ‘be’ together and she will never experience their love in return as a young adult. The future for Cameron is also unknown—she only hopes that ‘whatever’s waiting won’t manage to trip me up. At least not too much’ (469). Similar to *Huntress* and *The Difference Between You and Me*, Danforth’s novel leaves the reader with an open-ended conclusion. Cameron’s future is not secure, but ‘Big Sky Country’ Montana is now full of possibilities to Cameron and she is equipped, with her identity intact and her love reclaimed, to make her own wandering path. What awaits Cameron on the shore is a sense of the ‘whole world beyond’ as she describes—a limitless, expectant beyond (470).

Overall, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* refuses a singular romance narrative in favour of a story that tracks the emotional and physical development of its protagonist through several relationships. Her first kisses and brief romances are a method of experimentation with different forms of love (*eros*, *ludus*, *philia*). Depicting multiple first kiss scenes is atypical in lesbian YA novels as those narratives tend to focus on a singular romantic relationship, as demonstrated in the analysis of the previous three chapters. *Ask the Passengers* and *The Difference Between You and Me* move away from this standard, but those narratives still rely on a single love interest for the protagonist. Cameron’s progression of kissing demonstrates her growing awareness of her sexual identity as well as her development as a young adult. Through the

depiction of the first kiss scenes, the narrative also provides moments of ‘sweet’ levity and implicitly suggests the questions of identity and sexuality can be opened and answered through those experiences. At the centre of Danforth’s novel, the primary loving relationship is depicted through the reconciliation of Cameron’s relationship with her parents (*philia*) after their unexpected death. The central premise of the novel, its ‘what if?’ question, wanders across the terrain of its main themes of desire and grief, complicating the coming out story in a way that invites the reader to empathise and reflect on how they might respond in Cameron’s situation. The temporal distance of the narrative invites the reader to speculate on the experience of a teenage lesbian in rural Montana in the late twentieth century in relation to the reader’s own experience, which may or may not overlap generationally. Danforth also subtly utilises her historical novel to fill in a ‘gap in the historical record’ (Koonen 373) with the portrayal of Cameron’s and her fellow students’ experiences at God’s Promise. They represent a small fraction of the history of LGBTQ people in the US and illustrate some of the techniques and rhetoric used by gay conversion therapy practitioners to convince individuals that they can ‘recover’ from homosexuality. The novel speculates on the ‘sexually pluralistic past’ (196) of individual from or living in rural areas, like Eastern Montana, and challenges presumptions of heteronormativity in the depictions of those communities. An adolescent novel of ideas, this novel quietly asks questions of depth—of sexuality, of love, and of death—and invites the reader to ask what is ‘beyond and waiting’ (Danforth 470).

## **Conclusion**

From a Kingdom of Weirdness to Quake Lake, I have sought to demonstrate how these three novels wonder about and wander through their stories of young adult protagonists

who find their way to love. In one manner or another, *The Difference Between You and Me*, *Ask the Passengers*, and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* ask philosophically motivated questions—or questions about humanity—that challenge and invite the reader to engage with the hefty themes of the novels: freedom, justice, truth, grief, desire, death, and, ultimately, love. The novels examined in this chapter invite the reader ‘to test the ground of human experience’ (Sainsbury 15) through empathy, wonderment, and vicarious experimentation. Like Jesse’s NOLAW manifestos, the actions taken by each female protagonist demonstrates their ‘best idea’ (George 54) for how to effect change—in their lives, the lives of those in their community, and the lives of strangers. Love is central to that action and each of the narratives bring the reader’s attention to different forms of love, whether it is a romantic, platonic, or universal. The preoccupation with love as a force or a motivation offers the opportunity for the reader to reflect on how those loving relationships inform ‘who we can become’ (Lewis, et al. viii). Each author participates in and blends conventions from a range of genres—romance, magic realism, and the historical novel—to make their contemporary concerns more visible to the reader. Further evidence of the proliferation of ‘genre bending and blending’ (Cart 95) in YA literature in the twenty-first century, these authors are expanding what is possible in narratives about lesbian young adult characters and their love-centred relationships into unconventional directions. This expansive generic and thematic trajectory is sustained in Chapter Five as the thesis explores the lived experiences of first romantic relationships by lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists as reproduced in their graphic memoirs and shifts in the discussion of form, from the YA novel to the graphic text for young adult readers.

## Chapter Five

### **Drawing on Memories of First Loves:**

#### **Representations of Young Adult Same-Sex Relationships in Graphic Memoirs**

This final chapter examines how contemporary comics and graphic novels portray teenage female characters and their same-sex relationships for the implied young adult reader. During the period with which this study is concerned, comics and graphic novels portraying lesbian, bisexual, and queer female characters and their relationships have slowly emerged for this age-related readership with the publication of comics and graphic novels such as *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* (1995-1998) by Ariel Schrag, *Skim* (2008) by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, *Lumberjanes* (2015-2017) by Shannon Watters, et al., as well as webcomics like *Rock and Riot* (2015-2017) by Chelsey Furedi, *As the Crow Flies* (2012-2017) by Melanie Gillman, and *Princess Princess* (2014) by Katie O'Neill. These comics and graphic texts are available in libraries, bookstores, comic stores, and online, accessible to young adult readers in both recreational and educational contexts. When creating characters and stories that represent marginalised communities, 'who makes it matters' (McCloud *Reinventing Comics* 106), and the majority of the cartoonists referenced throughout this chapter identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer. In addition, some of the cartoonists created and published their work whilst they were teenagers themselves. As such, this chapter will be concerned, ideologically, with who is writing and for whom. The primary texts examined in this chapter are unified in their use of the comics form, the portrayal of female characters and their same-sex relationships, and the exploration of themes of sexuality and desire. As a genre, I have chosen to focus on graphic memoirs because the memoir form has been repeatedly employed by cartoonists as a way to depict and make sense of gender and sexuality. In addition, their autobiographical stories of first loves

and coming out parallel those narratives examined in YA novels throughout the thesis. My analysis will compare the following comics: *Definition* (1996) and *Potential* (1997) by Ariel Schrag (two parts of *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*), *Honor Girl* (2015) by Maggie Thrash, and *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden. Before examining the graphic memoirs in detail, I will situate the work within the comics form, the genre of memoir, and graphic memoirs created by lesbian, bisexual, and queer women cartoonists, drawing on the work of Alison Bechdel as a foundational example. This chapter explores how the personal narrative can be political within its historical and cultural context by comparing the visual and verbal narrative choices of each cartoonist in crafting their graphic memoirs.

### **Depicting the Undepicted in Comics: Theoretical Approaches to Graphic Memoirs**

In his theorization of the comics form, Scott McCloud argues that cartoons have the ability to ‘focus our attention on an idea’ because cartooning ‘isn’t just a way of drawing, it’s a way of seeing’ (*Understanding Comics* 31). Building on Will Eisner’s work in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), McCloud defines comics as ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer’ (9). This definition is deliberately broad in its understanding of comics and suggests that the ‘*potential* in comics is *limitless*’ (3). This potential notably expanded throughout the twentieth century as comics took on new and various forms, from the syndicated comic strip in newspapers to the serialised thirty-two-page comic book emerging in the 1930s to development of the graphic novel, used by works such as Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) (Chute ‘Comics as Literature’ 453). The term ‘graphic novel’ came into popular use as a marketing term in the early 2000s, much like the phrase

‘young adult novel’, and booksellers commonly use it as a label to ‘distinguish serious, adult work from comics for children’ (462). Hillary Chute prefers the term ‘graphic narrative’ to indicate ‘a book-length work in the medium of comics’ (453) because it encompasses fiction and nonfiction. I will use both ‘comics’ and ‘graphic memoir’ in this chapter to denote the selected works’ participation in the comics form and the genre of memoir. McCloud is also quick to assert that, despite common misconceptions, cartoons and comics occupy overlapping but distinct spaces. Cartooning is ‘an approach to *picture-making—a style*’ whilst the comics form is ‘a *medium* which often *employs* that approach’ (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 21). Chute adds that ‘comics differ from the cartoon, since cartoons are single-panel images’ (‘Comics as Literature’ 454).

As one style of creating comics, cartooning works on the principle of ‘amplification through simplification’ wherein the artist focuses the reader’s attention on specific details in order to communicate representative information about the characters (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 30). The iconography used to represent ‘a person, place, thing or idea’ (27) can also be intended to signify identity categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality. As ‘viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning’ (42), the more cartoon-like the character the more the reader is encouraged to identify with characters or experiences that may or may not be familiar to them. ‘By seeing and reading themselves into the story,’ Marjorie Allison argues, ‘readers can actively reimagine how the world is constructed and how they are similar to and different from the world the writers present’ (74). Depending on their personal experiences and identity categories, the comics reader may see and read themselves into the narratives in new and different ways. Like the graphic memoirs discussed by Allison, the works of Schrag, Thrash, and Walden allow marginalised voices and stories to be ‘brought to the centre and given a privileged place’ (74) and ‘invite readers to slow down and puzzle out not only how they are reading but also what they are reading

and thinking' (75, note 2). To that latter assertion, I add that, more generally, the comics form also invites readers to consider what they are *feeling* as the viewer-identification process engages readers on an emotional level as well.

In comics, 'every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice': the reader (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 68). The reader is 'an equal partner in crime' in making meaning from the comic, requiring the skills to interpret the verbal *and* the visual in an active state of reading (68-69). Because of the reader-creator relationship, McCloud argues that '[no] other artform gives so much to its audience while asking for so much from them as well' (91). His reasoning is based on the requirement of the reader to read what is inside the panels as well as what is happening *between* the panels, the space called the gutter. Chute concurs, arguing that 'a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning' ('Comics as Literature' 452). Closure is the technical term for how a reader 'reads' the gutters by interpreting what takes place between the panels to create a fluid sense of narrative. The bigger the gap between panels, in time, space, or action, the more work the reader must do. McCloud explains: 'Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows [the reader] to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality' (*Understanding Comics* 67). As the eye moves from panel to panel, meaning is produced in the gutters in conjunction with what is provided visually and verbally within the panels. Chute's proposed definition of comics hones in on this aspect of the reading process and frames it in terms of narrative, describing it as 'a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially' ('Comics as Literature' 452). In creating a narrative in this form, Chute posits that '[a] comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn't drawn as by what is: it is



highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments' (455).

I am particularly interested in how time and space are manipulated by the relationship between the panels, panel-to-panel transitions, and closure. In the graphic memoirs examined later in this chapter, I discuss the use of silent panels, which can 'produce a sense of timelessness', and borderless panels known as 'bleeds' (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 102). Of silent panels and bleeds, McCloud argues that such panels 'may linger in the reader's mind' into the panels that follow and that bleeds compound this effect (102). In these instances, '[time] is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead haemorrhages and escapes into timeless space. Such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timelessness presence' (103). As I will demonstrate, Thrash and Walden both employ silent panels and bleeds to engage the reader emotionally, particularly when depicting key events in the love story or revelations of sexual identity. Schrag also plays with the delineation of the panel, breaking or altering the structure of the panel to achieve similar aims. Through the vocabulary, grammar, and techniques of the comics form, the cartoonist requires the reader to play a more active role in interpreting and constructing the visual-verbal narrative. For the graphic memoirs in this chapter, those readers may be well practiced in the art of reading comics or they may be new to comics, either because of age, experience, or interest.

The intended readership for *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*, *Honor Girl*, and *I Love This Part* varies slightly, but the graphic memoirs generally address their narratives to an implied young adult audience. That said, in comparison to the YA novels, which are often published on YA imprints and explicitly marketed to teenagers, the comics publishing industry has a more varied approach to designating such readerships, particularly in regards to age. Starting in the 1950s, comics were rated by

the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a regulatory body for the comics industry that operated as an alternative to government regulation, but one that, Heike Bauer notes, ‘forbade the open representation of gay and lesbian characters’ until 1989 (224). When mainstream publishers like Marvel and DC withdrew from the CCA in the early 2000s, individual comics publishers then began to develop their own age ratings systems. These systems are more akin to rating systems used for film rather than publishing categories for novels. For example, the most general rating is ‘all ages’, which includes LGBTQ speculative fiction comics such as *Lumberjanes* and *Princess Princess Ever After* (2015) by Katie O’Neill, while the young adult range is broken down into yearly age- or grade-specific readerships, such as the rating ‘13 years and up’ for *Skim*, a graphic novel about a teenage female protagonist who practises Wicca and has a short relationship with her female teacher. Candlewick Press rates *Honor Girl* as ‘14 years and up’ and ‘grade 9 and up’. Like many of the comics publishers, Candlewick Press does not give a reason for these ratings, but it is curious that the implicit suggestion is that a thirteen-year-old reader of *Skim* should wait another year before reading *Honor Girl*, a graphic memoir about a teenage female protagonist who practises rifle shooting and has a short relationship with a female counsellor. Simon & Schuster has a range of age ratings that start with ‘12 years and up’, but the publisher places *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* only under ‘General Comics’, which presumably indicates that it is not recommended for readers under eighteen-years-old. This rating is not entirely surprising given the amount of nudity and sex in the four graphic memoirs. However, as I will discuss, this categorisation is a disservice to a narrative that directly addresses a young adult implied reader; Schrag was also a teenager still in high school when she created the series. Possibly because it is a small publisher, Avery Hill Press does not have any categories for its publications, age-related or not, and so does not suggest an age rating for *I Love This Part*. I suggest that the comic leans towards a ‘13

years and up' rating with its short length, pre-teen characters, and themes of friendship and relationships, as well as the use of one swear word.

Graphic memoirs like these are also less likely to be marketed specifically to readers based on their age or found in 'young adult' sections in the comics aisle in bookstores because comics are generally viewed as an already specialised (or marginalised) category of literature. Comics stores, on the other hand, may include these graphic memoirs in both the general section and the young adult section, if the store has one. Additionally, as Schrag illustrates in her *High School Chronicles* series, readers may access new work at comic conventions, another avenue that does not rely on the same mechanisms of distribution that YA novels depend on to reach their intended readership. The proliferation of webcomics, such as *As the Crow Flies*, *Princess Princess*, *Rock and Riot* and others, have made comics about LGBTQ characters even more accessible to readers of all ages as they are often recommended via social media, typically free to read, and may be a first introduction to the form. As graphic memoirs have become increasingly popular, in part due to the success of comics like *Persepolis* (2006) by Marjane Satrapi and *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, readers are also more likely to seek out graphic memoirs based on their interest in the form or because of a particular theme rather than select texts based on the intended audience.

Each graphic memoir examined in this chapter presents a finite period in the cartoonist's young adult life through the lens of specific events pertaining to their emerging sexuality. Heike Bauer notes that this style of 'coming-of-age comic' (225) has become more prominent as a subgenre, bolstered by the publication of Schrag's *High School Chronicles* in the late 1990s. Creating a narrative progression from a person's life is, William Bradley suggests, 'every memoirist's dilemma—life doesn't really follow a narrative pattern. You have to decide what to cut, what to emphasize,

and what really matters—what you want your reader to understand about yourself and your experience’ (163). Derek Neale concurs, arguing that writing a memoir of any kind requires ‘an editorial process of inclusion and exclusion’ (114). Delineating the relationship between the editorial process of autobiography versus memoir, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that, generally, memoir ‘takes *a segment of a life*, not its entirety’, and focuses on ‘the interconnected experiences’ (274, emphasis mine), such as those moments related to the author’s coming-of-age or emerging sexuality. This deliberate thematic emphasis on certain events in Schrag, Thrash, and Walden’s lives, with the exclusion of events not pertaining to their relationships or sexuality, means that their comics participate more in the genre of memoir than autobiography. What cartoonists choose to include or exclude is expressed both verbally and visually, shaping the narrative of that finite period of a life as well as exploiting the form of comics to disrupt or expand time, allowing for metacommentary on the cartoonist’s own experiences. For instance, Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, a memoir about the lesbian cartoonist’s relationship with her gay father, ‘uses [closure] to explore a more internal landscape’ (Bradley 164), sometimes commenting on her experiences retrospectively and other times creating intertextual links between her narrative and other works of literature. Each cartoonist makes the reader aware that they are self-consciously constructing their narratives in retrospect, exhibited through their use of narration, frame story, or focalisation, as I will explore in the following section.

Graphic memoirists can also suggest the political weight of their personal stories through the contextualisation of their visual/verbal narratives. In Schrag, Thrash, and Walden’s work there is the impression that the stories they have chosen to tell in their graphic memoirs are politically important in relation to, or because of, their personal experiences of sexuality, coming out, and young adult relationships. Each of these graphic memoirs situates their narratives within specific temporal, socio-cultural, and

political contexts, such as the era of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ and the conservatism of the South, that aim to illustrate for the reader how those experiences might differ from other narratives of coming out or same-sex relationships. Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is an example of this combination of a political context with a personal narrative in a graphic memoir. Julia Watson argues that Bechdel ‘maps the split in cultural views and practices that characterized the post-World War II US’ by contrasting ‘her father’s closeted homosexuality [...] and Alison’s coming-of-age story of discovering her own sexuality’ (34). Contextualising such a story within a political landscape re-writes a personal history, particularly her father’s private life, as well as gestures to two sets of shared experiences for each generation. In this way, graphic memoirs can challenge ‘dominant versions of history’ by doing ‘the work of historical representation’, as Chute argues (‘Decoding Comics’ 1017). For Schrag, Thrash, and Walden, their graphic memoirs challenge dominant heteronormative narratives that erase experiences of homosexuality and same-sex relationships that are particular to their respective geopolitical and temporal contexts.

These graphic memoirs also operate within a context of comics created by lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists who have focused on portraying non-heteronormative characters, relationships, and lives in fictional and nonfictional comics as a way of redressing the lack of representation in popular culture. Bauer labels this subgenre ‘lesbian comics’ and argues that ‘[s]peaking collectively about “lesbian comics” [...] is about interrogating the relationship between female same-sex subjectivities and feelings and the socio-political contexts by which queer lives continue to be marginalized or denied. Most of all, however, it is about insisting on the value of a lesbian presence’ (232). Thus far, I have mentioned Bechdel’s work a few times, not because she has intentionally created comics for a young adult audience, but because of her legacy: Bechdel is the most prolific and influential lesbian cartoonist in the field. In

the ‘Cartoonist’s Introduction’ to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2009), the edited collection of the complete *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1986-2005) (*DTWOF*), Bechdel outlines the development of and intention behind her iconic lesbian comic series. Bechdel describes moving to New York City as a newly out lesbian in her early twenties, how she was captivated by the ‘unruly pageant’ of lesbians around her, and that she turned to cartoons to capture the ‘plenitude’ of the community (*EDTWOF* xii). Bechdel cites the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich as influential in her intention ‘to name the unnamed, to depict the undepicted, to make lesbians visible’ through *DTWOF* (xvii). Illustrating a flashback scene from college as a way of explaining her development as a young lesbian feminist, Bechdel includes a passage from Rich’s speech ‘It Is the Lesbian In Us...’ from the collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (1979):

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable* (199).

Rich’s call-to-action is one that aims to challenge the dominant narratives of history by demanding the visibility of lesbian lives, lest those lives and their histories remain or become silenced. Bechdel’s response was to create a ‘catalog of lesbians’ and her characters reflected the changing political landscape of lesbian, bisexual, and queer identities over the ensuing nineteen-year period (*EDTWOF* xiv). Bechdel turned to introspective representation through the creation of her graphic memoirs: *Fun Home*, which became a best-selling book and was adapted into an award-winning Broadway musical, and *Are You My Mother?* (2012). Through the legacy of her comic strip and

her graphic memoirs, Bechdel has continued her intention to make lesbian lives visible.<sup>17</sup>

Concurrently, other lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists have employed the graphic memoir form as a medium for making their lives visible in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. These writers and artists explore a range of topics and experiences inextricably intertwined with their non-heteronormative sexual identities and relationships: *Rent Girl* (2004) by Michelle Tea discusses her first relationships with women and her experiences as a sex worker; *Calling Dr Laura* (2013) by Nicole J. Georges tries to uncover family secrets of a long-lost father; *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* (2014) by A.K. Summers portrays one butch lesbian's experience of being pregnant; Canadian cartoonist Diane Obomsawin collected her friends' stories of 'first love and sexual identities' into a series of comics in *On Loving Women* (2014); *Snapshots of a Girl* (2015) by Beldan Sezen, published in Canada, tells the story of coming out in Western Europe as the daughter of Turkish immigrants; and Tillie Walden has a new graphic memoir on her childhood as a figure skater in *Spinning* (2017).

Schrag began cartooning in the late 1990s, self-publishing her work after each year of high school, but *Potential* was not first published until 2000. *Awkward* and *Definition* followed, in a combined volume, in 2008 and *Likewise* was published in 2009. *Honor Girl* and *I Love This Part* were both published in 2015, at which point graphic memoirs and YA novels depicting lesbian and bisexual characters had been gaining in popularity over the last decade. By examining the work of Schrag, Thrash, and Walden within the context of their contemporaries, I aim to put the cartoonists'

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<sup>17</sup> Bechdel has also become popularly known for the 'The Bechdel Test', a rating system for the fictional depiction of women that was popularised by film studies in the early 2000s. To pass the test, a film must meet three criteria: have 'at least two (named) women characters, who talk to each other, about something besides a man' (Bechdel 'Testy'). Bechdel included the criteria in 'The Rule', a strip that appeared in *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1986) where she credited the idea to her friend, Liz Wallace; she also suggests that the concept likely originated from the 'Chloe liked Olivia' passage in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) ('Testy'; 'The Rule').

depictions of love and sexuality in conversation with one another as they expand the richness of experiences depicted and named in graphic memoirs. These three graphic memoirs recount the cartoonists' teenage experiences of coming out, falling in love, and being broken-hearted and, in doing so, make their lives visible to readers in ways that are different from the fictional, text-based depictions of characters in YA novels.

### **Identity and Heartbreak: Graphic Memoirs and Autobiographical Material**

*The Life of a Teenage Lesbian in Berkeley*

*The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* records the events of Schrag's development and relationships during her four years of high school in Berkeley, California, from the autumn of 1994 to the summer of 1998. Bauer argues that Schrag's series is 'one of the most influential contributions' to the 'coming-of-age' memoir, in part because it is an 'example of the possibilities of comics to represent and interrogate the disjunctures between knowing and feeling, *disjunctures that mark the process of becoming*' (226, emphasis mine). The series reflects the gaps and overlaps in the progression of her identity formation because she herself was still in the 'process of becoming' as and when she created the comics. While Schrag was fumbling her way towards claiming her lesbian identity, major national events demonstrated that the United States continued to hold disparaging views nationally of the LGBTQ community. In 1994, the Clinton Administration signed the policy 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' into law, a conservative compromise that was intended to replace an earlier complete ban on homosexuality in the armed forces. Three years later, Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian, on *The Ellen Show* and the cover of *Time Magazine*. This was a crucial turning point in the representation of LGBTQ people on television and in



popular culture, but an action that had dismal consequences for DeGeneres' career in the immediate subsequent years.

However, Schrag's recollection of events focuses almost completely on her day-to-day concerns about dating, sex, school, and pop music rather than on the haphazard moments when issues concerning LGBTQ people became headlines in the national news. This is reflective of the fact that the *High School Chronicles* is more a product of its socio-cultural context than its historical context. Berkeley is one of the most liberal cities in the US, known for its counter-culture and progressive politics since the 1960s and part of the larger San Francisco Bay Area—similar to the liberal setting of San Francisco in Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013) examined in Chapter Three. In the comic, Schrag portrays herself as one of several teenage girls who identify as lesbian or bisexual within her social network. While representations of LGBTQ communities are still uncommon in literature for young adults, especially YA novels, Schrag includes an above-average depiction of sexual diversity, in part, because the comic is based in Berkeley<sup>18</sup>. Within this context, Schrag narrates her 'trials and tribulations' (*Awkward* 2) as Ariel, the narrator, who directly addresses the reader as an intimate confidant in the confessional retelling of her yearly experiences. Schrag switches between a combination of verbal techniques: narration, dialogue, internal monologue, and silent panels. Her visual style of cartooning—black and white line drawings—relies on the principal of 'amplification through simplification', which invites the reader to empathise with her character. Her style and execution for the comic also improves over the course of the graphic memoirs. As Bauer writes, *The High School Chronicles* 'document their own development [as comics] [...] and they chart Schrag's own sexual coming of age' (226). While her graphic memoir series covers much ground over the four years of high school, my analysis focuses on *Definition* and

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<sup>18</sup> This is based on incidental knowledge of the resident population of Berkeley and cannot be verified with census information because the state and national census does not record sexuality as part of its data collection.

*Potential*, wherein Ariel directly discusses the evolution of her sexuality and her expanding sexual experiences, in order to demonstrate how Schrag records her 'process of becoming' (Bauer 226) for the young adult reader.

During her sophomore and junior years of high school, Ariel's process of coming out begins with questions of sexuality as her identity categories and desires are challenged and revealed. In *Definition*, the first panel of the first chapter shows a female figure in a classroom setting shouting 'You're a DYKE!!!' (*Definition 1*) whilst pointing her forefinger at the reader. The recipient of the charge is Ariel, who quickly and quietly protests that she is straight. Responding to the peer pressure to declare herself a lesbian, or even somewhere between '2-4' on the Kinsey Scale, Ariel explains to the reader that her construction of sexual identity is more complicated than the boxes being presented to her, namely 'dyke' or 'straight'. She confesses to thinking about girls sexually, but states that she loves boys. Depicted with a look of annoyance and with her arms crossed, Ariel rhetorically asks the reader, 'So what option does that leave?' (3). The following panel provides the answer: 'BI', written so large as to fill the space in white block capital letters on a black background (3). Because she is uncomfortable with the bisexual 'gang' as she derogatorily calls it, Ariel asserts to the reader that she is 'straight' (2). Still, the accompanying illustration undermines the reader's confidence in Ariel's claim to heterosexuality with satirical notices, such as 'Definition #1 straight = me' (3), positioned around Ariel's hunched posture. The tension Schrag creates in this page illustrates three processes of identity formation occurring simultaneously. First, Ariel is uncomfortable with claiming bisexuality as a sexual identity category. Even though she experiences sexual attraction towards both girls and boys, it is implied that she would rather distance herself from what she views to be a competitive, cliquey idea of bisexuality. Second, and more subtle, is the suggestion that Ariel's understanding of her sexual identity is currently in flux. Finally, the reader may also be questioning their

own sexuality, which may be challenged or confirmed by relating to Ariel's experiences through the reading process. Instead of overtly rejecting bisexuality, the text implies an underlying sense of anxiety: Ariel does not fully know what her sexuality is, so she chooses to maintain



Figure 10: From *Definition* (1996) by Ariel Schrag

the only sexual identity she has known—heterosexuality—rather than claim a new identity.

Ariel quickly complicates this presentation of her heterosexuality by foregrounding the experience of her first (and second) same-sex kiss as a revelatory turning point in her identity construction. The descriptions in these scenes mirror the romantic language used in first kiss scenes in lesbian YA romance novels as well as frame Ariel's coming out process through the corporeal experience of kissing. In the second chapter of *Definition*, Ariel is kissed by her crush Rosary when they pose for an impromptu photo. Ariel appears stiff and awkward with her arms around Rosary as the older girl kisses her intently. Schrag recreates the moment in photorealism within a circular inset panel and labels it with the caption 'DEFINITION PERFECTION' (13). Schrag's narrative choice to shift drawing styles from cartooning to realism disrupts the rhythm of the comic, forcing a pause in the reading process by making the iconic

representations of Ariel and Rosary suddenly life-like. This also creates narrative distance, discouraging the reader from emotionally relating to the kiss by representing the experience as specific to Ariel. The following text-only panel emotionally reengages the reader, though, as it begins by describing the revelatory experience of kissing Rosary: 'It was as if suddenly everything about kissing made sense and all those other awful bland boring kisses I'd had vanished away with unimportance and insignificance all the doubts and wonders about kissing thrust aside with a laugh because now I knew....' (13). Ariel references some of the physical sensations of the kiss, but the majority of her description is on the emotional and conceptual experience. This type of language appears in YA novels as well when Ash feels her body 'reorienting itself' to Kaisa in Lo's *Ash* (2009) or in Emily's descriptions of kissing Jesse versus her boyfriend in Madeleine George's *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012). The description implies that, for Ariel, kissing a girl is a revelatory experience that she understands to be significant, comprehensible, and enjoyable.

Whilst Ariel professes to have 'all the doubts and wonders about kissing thrust aside', there is still some internal reckoning to be calculated before she can understand what this experience means to her and her sense of sexual identity. This is evident in the following chapter where Ariel narrates a second unexpected experience of kissing a girl, Berlyn, utilising similarly revelatory language: 'and at that moment I turned my head and we started kissing. it felt so natural and normal doing it, I couldn't believe how long I'd avoided it, not wanting to deal when it was really so simple' (18). Again, Ariel focuses on the larger feelings of kissing, rather than the specificity of kissing Berlyn in relating her experience to the reader. The romanticised language of how 'natural' and 'normal' the kiss felt impresses upon the reader the magnitude of Ariel's feelings, whilst also implying that she once considered kissing girls to be unnatural and non-normative. Ariel's remaining uneasiness with the concept of enjoying a same-sex kiss is

compounded by her refusal to name it. In both kissing scenes, Ariel does not say that these experiences are unique because she is *kissing a girl*. Instead, she refers to the experience of the same-sex kiss as ‘it’, leaving the interpretation open to the reader to understand that ‘it’ is the act of kissing Rosary/Berlyn. This avoidance of specificity is in line with Ariel’s tenuous construction of her sexual identity at the beginning of *Definition*. At 15 years old, Ariel is excited by how the experiences of kissing girls makes her feel, but she remains in the process of understanding what that means for her identity.

In *Potential*, Ariel’s junior year of high school, the development of her understanding of her sexuality and sense of identity continues to progress as Ariel declares herself a lesbian by the end of the Chapter One. Schrag codes the illustrated opening monologue with sexually charged language, setting the tone for the third volume of the graphic memoir series as one founded in the erotic rather than the romantic: ‘Junior year and that means business [...] we’re talkin’: A’s to plow [sic] for, virginities to lose, proms to attend, we’re talkin’— POTENTIAL so thick you could sink your teeth in it’ (*Potential* 1). Schrag emphasises her point by illustrating Ariel wielding a chicken drumstick and then by biting into it, an image that conveys Ariel’s sexual eagerness and frustration. Schrag thematically focuses her first chapter on her overwhelming fantasies about other girls in her high school. In the first instance, an embarrassed Ariel is depicted surrounded by an imaginary group of female classmates, all of whom are naked and posed provocatively whilst flirting with her in the hallway. In the second scene, Schrag introduces Stacey, the ‘big dyke on campus’, into the narrative, of whom she dreams at night. The sexual fantasy is drawn as a dream sequence, in the same style of photo-realism that was used for her kiss with Rosary, that begins with the two girls collecting fish in buckets and progresses to Ariel and Stacey making out in the shower, naked. Again, Schrag switches to a realistic drawing style to

emotionally distance the reader and make them a witness, rather than an accomplice, in her sexual fantasies. Schrag uses the two erotic comic sequences of her fantasies at school and in her dreams to demonstrate her confusion regarding her same-sex attractions. The comic sequences expose Ariel's preoccupation with her desires internally but, at the same time, confirm that those thoughts are not



Figure 11: From *Potential* (1997) by Ariel Schrag

enough to shift her identity externally. Instead, Schrag frames a physical experience—a hug from Alexis, a girl who has a crush on Ariel—as the action that finally forces Ariel to concede her same-sex desires as confirmation of her sexual identity. Using similarly romantic language to the descriptions of kissing Rosary and Berlyn in *Definition*, Ariel narrates the feelings after her hug with Alexis: ‘and with just that one hug I began to feel something very odd accumulating in the air. [The] potential for what more could come was too much to resist. [...] DYKEDOM HERE I COME!’ (9). In the recreation of these imaginative and lived scenes, Schrag depicts the evolution of her coming out process and continues to frame the revelation of her sexual identity through the physical manifestations of her sexuality.

Operating in tandem with the narration on the final page of Chapter One in *Potential*, the illustrations signal Ariel's identity transformation through a series of physical changes as she claims her lesbian identity. First, Ariel stands confidently with her hands on her hips in the centre of the page without a frame as she states: ‘Well, it's not like being bi was a prize to hold onto!’ (9). While dismissive of bisexuality as a

sexual identity, this statement is consistent with Ariel's feelings as expressed at the beginning of *Definition*. Schrag does not portray bisexuality as a phase (a stereotypical misunderstanding of bisexuality), but Ariel, as narrator, does imply that this identity category is insufficient to her. In the following panel, Ariel throws a bouquet labelled 'bi-sex-u-al' to a group of girls in the distance as she runs out of one frame, breaking its border with her left foot. The illustration echoes the fervour of a bride tossing a bouquet at a wedding as Ariel dismisses heterosexual desire in favour of a life 'outside of the box'. Finally, centred at the bottom of the page Ariel appears in a panel with double thick black edges, where she simultaneously cuts her blonde hair short and dyes it black. As inferred by Ariel's experience, the act of choosing a new short hairstyle can be a large aspect of the process of understanding or claiming a new non-heteronormative sexual identity. Whether or not the individual retains that hairstyle permanently, this act is often treated as a symbolic rejection of conventional, heterosexual beauty norms—a decision that Maggie also makes in *Honor Girl* (Thrash 182-186). (Despite the commonality of this lived experience, similar acts of haircutting are referenced in only a few lesbian YA novels, such as *Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan and *She Loves You, She Loves You Not...* (2011) by Julie Anne Peters—an interesting discontinuity in a subgenre of literature that favours realism.) In this final frame, Ariel is drawn with her biggest smile yet as she raises one fist in the air with conviction to embrace 'dykedom'. This five-panelled page demonstrates Ariel's development of her sexual identity as she moves from a boundary-less space to a boundary she can step out of—bisexuality—to a final position—'dykedom'—where she appears most secure and confident.

Ariel continues to refine her sexual identity throughout the graphic memoir series, but it is only in the opening chapters of *Definition* and *Potential* where she directly addresses the question of her sexuality to the reader. Similar to the narrative

construction of multiple romantic and sexual relationships in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth as discussed in Chapter Four, Schrag's *High School Chronicles* do not construct a singular coming out narrative or a central love story. Instead, Schrag commits to the portrayal of her 'process of becoming' (Bauer 226) as a teenage lesbian in Berkeley, California, in the 1990s. Her overall intention is to communicate her sexuality and sexual identity as a process, offering the record of that progression to the reader in comic form.

### *Speaking the Unspeakable in the South*

While Schrag's *High School Chronicles* series spans multiple years, the graphic memoir *Honor Girl* by Maggie Thrash focuses on her experiences during the summer she turned fifteen at a Christian all-girls' summer camp. Narrated in first person, the graphic memoir takes place at Camp Bellflower, the fictional name for the summer camp that Thrash attended in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky in 2000, the kind of place where it is 'important for everyone to be the same' (Thrash 10). As narrator, Maggie explains that she is a third-generation camper among the women in her family as are the majority of the campers, who she collectively describes as 'a bunch of Christian girls who sang songs together' and participated in daily, mandatory Civil War re-enactments (17). Maggie is the only girl from Atlanta, Georgia, but this means a particular kind of freedom for her in the summer: the possibility that she 'could be a completely different person if [she] wanted to', which implies her consideration of her homosexuality but is a perspective that is at odds with the expectations of conformity at camp (10). The tension between Maggie's desire to fit in and her 'freakish feelings' (212) for a female counsellor, Erin, is sustained over the course of the narrative as the graphic memoir explores the consequences of maintaining cultural norms. To facilitate this tension,



Thrash relies on a chronological timeline to create a sense of Maggie's 'coming of age' over the course of the graphic memoir, as her awareness of her sexuality develops and she experiences an (unfulfilled) same-sex relationship for the first time. Thrash's drawings are executed in a cartoon style with watercolour pencil and thin black ink outlines and borders. Particularly noteworthy is the way Thrash imbues the colours in the sky at different times of the day, from the rich hues of sunrise and sunset to the clear blue skies and rainy days, with an emotional resonance that encourages the reader to step into Maggie's internal world and re-experience her coming out story with her. The personal narrative is juxtaposed with its setting in the conservative political context of a Christian camp in the Southern United States, where attitudes towards homosexuality remain discriminatory; Thrash's experience reflects none of the freedoms or community that Schrag depicts in Berkeley a few years prior. By writing her personal experience, Thrash challenges the heteronormative history of Christian summer camps and the South more generally.

The catalyst for Maggie's coming out is the knowledge and suspicion of her emerging, requited crush on Erin, a nineteen-year-old female counsellor. The coming out scenes in Thrash's graphic memoir contrast with Ariel's discussion of sexuality in *High School Chronicles* because Maggie does not have the freedom or confidence to declare 'DYKEDOM HERE I COME!' (Schrag *Potential* 9). In *Honor Girl*, Maggie does not come out or label her sexual identity to the reader; rather, she alludes to previous campers who were rumoured to be gay or lesbian to demonstrate her internal preoccupation with questions of her own sexuality. When she does 'come out' it is because she is *outed* by other people in private conversation, on three separate occasions in the narrative. When her two closest friends at camp, Bethany and Shannon, question her sexuality Maggie reluctantly and obliquely confirms their suspicions. These scenes are handled with humour and a general tone of acceptance. When Bethany



Figure 12: From *Honor Girl* (2015) by Maggie Thrash

figures out Maggie has a crush on Erin, Thrash illustrates Bethany's acceptance with a randomised collection of broken sentences, non-sequitur phrases, and affirmative remarks such as 'homophobia is so passé' and 'can't pray that shit away!' that are intended to reassure Maggie that her friend accepts her sexual identity (Thrash 74). Bethany encourages Maggie to think that she can 'totally pull [being a lesbian] off' as long as she is not a 'freak' (75). The coming out scene with Shannon plays out similarly insofar as Shannon asks Maggie directly about her sexuality, Maggie confirms by omission, and Shannon accepts her (186-187). By repeating the coming out experience for the reader, Thrash reinforces Maggie's continued anxiety regarding her sexuality. These scenes elicit empathy from the reader: Maggie's sexual identity is still in process. Thrash is also demonstrating the everyday repetitive action of coming out for LGBTQ people, as also depicted in Nina LaCour's *Everything Leads to You* (2014) discussed in Chapter One. This contrasts in purpose, though, with many of the other YA novels discussed in the first two chapters, particularly novels by Julie Anne Peters, that depict multiple coming out scenes with friends and parents of the protagonist, but where those scenes, by-and-large, function as catalysts for narrative action (e.g. Holland is disowned

and made homeless by her mother after coming out in Peters' *Keeping You a Secret* (2003)) rather than attempts to reproduce a facsimile of real-life experiences. In *Honor Girl*, the coming out scenes with Maggie's fellow campers are positive experiences and result in a new friendship (with Bethany) and the repairing of an old friendship (with Shannon) whilst also recording Thrash's first conversations regarding same-sex attraction as a teenager.

While Maggie's friends demonstrate support of her sexuality, Thrash situates those conversations within a larger context of suspicion and accusation regarding homosexuality in the South. In a tense and politically charged scene, Thrash reproduces the event when she is outed in private by Tammy, the Head Counsellor at Camp Bellflower, after Tammy finds her discarded love letters to Erin and confronts her about them. Tammy appears to firstly be concerned that Erin has or would commit statutory rape and about the potential legal ramifications that crime would have for the camp and the counsellor. She informs Maggie that her parents could sue the camp and Erin could go to jail because 'the law is worse for queers' (171). Tammy's warning is accurate insofar as even if Maggie, aged fifteen, and Erin, aged nineteen, had consensual sex, it would be considered statutory rape in Kentucky. Although the law varies from state to state, the age of consent in Kentucky is sixteen; furthermore, because Erin is in a 'position of trust or authority' over Maggie, the age of consent would potentially be raised to eighteen and the degree of the crime would be increased. However, the law is not technically 'worse for queers' in Kentucky because the state does not differentiate penalties for statutory rape in instances of opposite-sex or same-sex consensual sexual activity for minors ('Kentucky Age of Consent Laws'). From the reader's perspective, Tammy's concern is unfounded because while Maggie and Erin have mutual feelings for each other, their romantic relationship is purely hypothetical. The graphic memoir depicts a couple of opportunities wherein the two young women could have kissed, but

Maggie has demonstrated—to Erin and the reader—that she is not emotionally ready to share a same-sex kiss or have sex. Thrash protests by reassuring Tammy that she feels ‘safe’ and that Erin is ‘not, like, pressuring [her]’, a sentiment with which the reader is meant to relate (Thrash 172). Ultimately, however, Tammy’s comment is not invested in deterring Maggie from participating in under-aged sex, but in communicating her strong disapproval of Maggie’s same-sex desires. Tammy’s inference that the law is ‘worse for queers’ is meant to discourage Maggie from further relations with Erin. By including this portion of conversation between the head counsellor and the camp, Thrash is also implicitly displaying the general disparaging cultural attitude towards homosexuality in the South.

To underscore this sentiment, Tammy clarifies that it is her job ‘to make sure everyone feels safe’, which includes making sure ‘everyone **else**’ feels safe *from Maggie* because ‘parents don’t send their girls here to frolic around in [Maggie’s] lesbian fantasy’ (172). In this remark, the head counsellor turns the tables on Maggie: Erin is not a ‘predator’ just because she is older; she and Maggie are both ‘predators’ because of their same-sex desires. Thrash foreshadows this connection earlier in the book by naming her sixth chapter ‘Predators’, a chapter in which Tammy witnesses Maggie and Erin holding hands for the first time. Equating same-sex desires with predatory behaviour is a contributing cultural factor to the construction of the laws that criminalise homosexuality worldwide as well as to US-specific legislation, such as ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT), as referenced earlier. Tammy further emphasises this point in the conversation with a specific reference to DADT:

“Have you heard of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell?’”

“... Yes.”

“Well, it’s the law. And it means no one wants to know your business. So don’t shove it in people’s faces.”

“It wasn’t in your face. It was in the trash” (172).

In addition to recounting her coming out experience within the cultural context of a Christian all-girls camp in the South, Thrash is deliberately situating her experiences within the historical context of the DADT era (1994-2011). While DADT only applied to active military service members, the name of the policy became cultural shorthand for socially policing LGBTQ individuals and homosexual behaviour throughout the country. The actual law would not have been applied to Thrash in any situation—as a fifteen-year-old or as a civilian—but Tammy’s inaccurate explanations of the law are intended to threaten and demoralise. At the end of the conversation Tammy gives Maggie a final instruction: ‘Listen, Maggie. You’re going to be fine. Just don’t talk to Erin anymore. Just...do what you were doing before’ (174). Maggie is depicted alone on the porch, holding the incriminating love letters, contemplating what the point of being in love if a person is just left ‘carrying this desire now’ (174). The accompanying illustration is a silent bleed panel: Maggie sits in a wooden chair with her hair obscuring her faces; the sun is bright on the left but the storm clouds remain thick behind Maggie on the right. The sense of timelessness in the bleed translates into Maggie’s entrapment: she is in love with Erin, but without the power or freedom to express it, deemed a predator based on her desires.

As a thematic portrait of the cartoonist’s life over the course of one summer, *Honor Girl* is a love story of unfulfilled desires. Unlike the lesbian YA novels discussed in the previous chapters where the protagonist is at least guaranteed a first kiss, if not a relationship, during the course of their summer romance—Nic and Battle at a summer arts camp in *Empress of the World* (2003) by Sara Ryan, for example—Thrash recounts an autobiographical story in which she is never able to kiss or be in a relationship with her crush. While the graphic memoir does include a kiss between Maggie and Erin, it is a dream-sequence when Maggie is sleepwalking: a sequence of nine silent panels set on

the shores of the lake against a deep purple sky (110). It is only in this dream space that Maggie appears confident in her sexuality and asserts her desire for Erin. As I have noted, there are a few instances in which Maggie acknowledges a kiss might have been possible, but the most intimate scene between the two young women takes place halfway through the graphic memoir without a kiss.

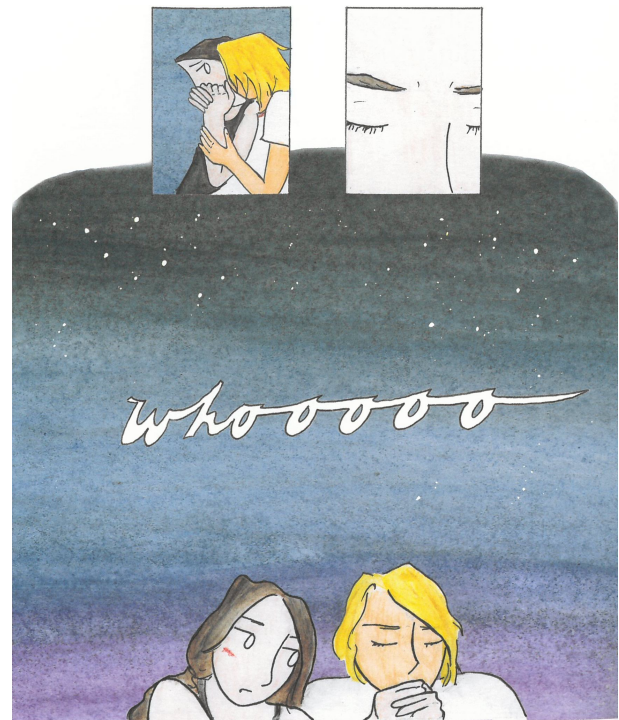


Figure 13: From *Honor Girl* (2015) by Maggie Thrash

When Maggie and Erin end up outside of a dance at the same time by chance, they sneak away for a moment to avoid being seen by Tammy and the other counsellors. As a cover for any noise they might make talking, Maggie tries to teach Erin how to produce a birdcall using her hands and breath. Erin is unable to produce the whistle-like sound, so Maggie offers her two, cupped hands. The following page contains three silent panels that transition aspect-to-aspect: the two young women from the side, a close-up for Maggie's brow with closed eyes, and a larger bleed of Erin producing the sound 'whooooo' from Maggie's hands (136). Time is suspended for the length of the birdcall as the onomatopoeic word visually extends over the purple-to-black ombre night sky to the edge of the bleed. Thrash draws out this interruption in their rambling conversation in order to emphasise its significance for fifteen-year-old Maggie. The closing of Maggie's eyes in the middle panel combined with her intense focus on Erin in the other two panels communicates the younger girl's desire and concentration. The reader can imagine Maggie holding her breath for the duration of the moment when Erin's lips touch her hands. When they part, Thrash depicts each girl going their

separate way, but looking over their shoulders at one another in another silent panel set against the dark night sky on the following page; their desire for one another is as evident as is it innocent. This scene is the apex of Maggie and Erin's love story, full of potential and yet ultimately unfulfilled. However, within her socio-cultural, geographical context and its pressure to maintain heteronormativity, Thrash demonstrates how even the act of knowing one's (same-sex) desires are required is worthy of a story.

This retelling of a real-life experience of coming-of-age as a lesbian at a Christian all-girls summer camp in the South allows Thrash to invoke the constraints and discrimination inherent in that political climate for her twenty-first century reader. I argue that in creating *Honor Girl*, Thrash achieves the aim 'to depict the undepicted, to name the unnamed' (Bechdel *EDTWO* xvii) in a historical and cultural context where homosexuality is often 'unspeakable' (Rich 199). By reclaiming her own narrative, Thrash adds to a small number of authors and cartoonists voicing their experiences of growing up LGBTQ in the South (and YA novels) for a young adult audience as she writes herself into the history of a Christian all-girls summer camp—whether the campers and counsellors want her to be there or not.

#### *'Somewhat Autobiographical'*

*I Love This Part* by Tillie Walden is a graphic text that tells the story of the friendship and love between two young teenage girls, set in a small town in Texas. The story of Elizabeth and Rae depicts a relationship that begins as a friendship wherein two girls share an interest in music and music videos, complete homework together, and confide in one another. Over the course of the graphic text Walden slowly builds the depth of the two girls' affections as the awareness for their romantic feelings for one another

grows until the relationship reaches a breaking point. Unlike the narrated, chronological graphic memoirs of Schrag's *High School Chronicles* and Thrash's *Honor Girl*, Walden's *I Love This Part* delivers its oblique narrative through disparate moments and conversations combined with landscape illustrations, both natural and urban. The images are completed in black ink with lilac and grey watercolour washes that give the graphic text a wistful mood. Walden also uses watercolour to indicate the girls' ethnicities: Elizabeth's skin tone and hair colour is the white of page with light lilac watercolour to suggest her skin contours whilst Rae's skin tone is illustrated with a deep lilac watercolour and her short, natural hair is depicted in opaque black ink. In overall execution, *I Love This Part* straddles the line between memoir and fiction. In this way, it is similar in tone to the Canadian graphic novel *Skim*, which professes to be 'the diary of Kimberly Keiko Cameron (aka Skim)' on the cover, while a note on the copyright page informs to the reader that *Skim* is a work of fiction. The written text of *I Love This Part* is limited to brief dialogue exchanges as well as text messages in Apple iOS format, the latter element of which lends a degree of veracity to the text in the same way that Schrag's physical files of notes on her life inform and appear in her graphic memoir series. In contrast to the written text, Walden's illustrations often grossly exaggerate the scale of the two girls against the landscape in multiple *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*-style images where the teenagers tower above mountains or buildings. Analysis of the peritextual components of *I Love This Part* well as the publicity and author information available online yields no indication as to whether or not the narrative is autobiographical. Yet, the focalisation of the narrative marginally preferences Elizabeth's perspective, whose pictorial representation resembles Walden's illustrations of herself in her forthcoming graphic memoir *Spinning*. Without enough evidence to conclude whether or not *I Love This Part* is autobiographical, I sought clarification from the cartoonist. Through an email exchange (see Appendix 6), Walden



confirmed that the story is ‘somewhat autobiographical’, stating that ‘the girls’ personalities and conversations are true’ and ‘[everything] up until the very end is pretty much true, though the relationship it’s based on ended slightly differently’ (Walden ‘A question’). *I Love This Part* sets forth a plausible relationship based on a real-life relationship as experienced by Walden, and yet the cartoonist has chosen to end the love story of Elizabeth and Rae ‘slightly differently’ than her own. Not quite graphic memoir and not quite fiction, I examine how Walden’s graphic text intends to recount an autobiographical story about a same-sex relationship while at the same time aims to emotionally connect with the readers as if this story is part of their set of experiences, too.

While *I Love This Part* was published in 2015, the historical context for the story itself fills a particular niche in the timeline of texts explored in this chapter. Walden was born in Austin, Texas, in 1996; that same year *Definition* was created whilst Schrag was a sophomore in high school in Berkeley, California. The characters in *I Love This Part* are young teenagers of about thirteen or fourteen years old, therefore Walden’s semi-autobiographical narrative is arguably set around 2010, ten years after Thrash’s experiences at Camp Bellflower. Because of this specific time period, the US that Walden grew up in a slightly different one, culturally and politically nationwide, than would have been experienced by Schrag and Thrash. As previously explored in the Introduction to this thesis, the difference in the political climate is attributable to a groundswell of public knowledge of and support for LGBTQ issues: the *It Gets Better* project produced thousands of videos online, specifically reaching out to LGBTQ teenagers at risk of suicide and depression, especially in isolated or conservative areas of the country; the marriage equality movement gained momentum with same-sex marriage legal in five states and Washington D.C. by 2010; and President Obama promised to repeal ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ during his 2008 campaign. And yet, like



Figure 14: From *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden

Kentucky, Texas is a proud Southern state and homophobic sentiments are still culturally engrained and reflected in Walden's graphic text. Because of their same-sex desires, the thoughts and feelings expressed by the two girls are coded in evasive terms and their questions are based in fear and worry. In the sixth panel, Elizabeth asks Rae if she 'likes' her and expresses worry that her affection might not have been required. In the tenth panel that depicts

Elizabeth and Rae facing each other holding both hands, wrapped up in warm clothing against the elements, Elizabeth asks Rae, 'can we ever tell anybody?' to which Rae replies, 'probably not' (*I Love This Part* 11) (See fig. 5). The weight of Rae's answer is clear in Elizabeth's defeated posture. The thunderstorm amassed behind them dwarfs all the features on the landscape, and the two girls appear to be literally 'left out in the cold'. These two panels are the closest approximation to a 'coming out' event in Walden's graphic text and yet neither girl 'comes out' or claims a sexual identity. This non-event requires the reader to use their cultural knowledge of the historical context of the story to understand the implications of the two girls' conversations and body language. When Rae replies 'a lot' as to whether or not she likes Elizabeth, the reader cannot be sure if Rae is responding to their friendship or emerging romantic feelings *in addition to* their friendship (7). Equally, the reader cannot confirm whether or not the information that Elizabeth and Rae can 'probably not' tell 'anybody' about is in regards to their same-sex relationship (if the illustrated close physical contact can constitute

enough information to presume a relationship to begin with), and therefore their potential non-heteronormative identities. However, the reader can be sure at this point in the narrative that whatever has taken place between them cannot be shared with their community. When Tammy invokes DADT in her conversation with Maggie in *Honor Girl*, she is attempting to censor Maggie by invoking a larger cultural understanding of homosexuality. Walden, however, chooses to depict the two girls briefly discussing the matter and then censoring themselves, without relying on an additional character to intervene in the (non)disclosure of Elizabeth and Rae's relationship. Walden trusts the reader's understanding of the negative, homophobic consequences that the teenagers will face if they came out to members of their community.

There are moments of joy in the graphic text that demonstrate the playfulness (*ludus*) that Elizabeth and Rae experience in their relationship. A few of the early panels depict the girls laughing and smiling as they share their interests in music videos, video games, and various websites (e.g. YouTube, IKEA, cookery websites). Intimate and gentle displays of affection are placed throughout the graphic text to underpin their affection and desire for one another. The phrase 'I love you' (12) is suspended in a speech balloon with no tail above a peaceful scene of Elizabeth and Rae looking out over a body of water and hillside of buildings. The verbal text may be the words the girls have mutually expressed to each other, or they may be the sentiment that the girls feel when they are together; the reader ultimately determines the meaning. Late in the graphic text, Walden communicates the girls' building desire for one another with a shared kiss, the first and only kiss in *I Love This Part*, in a sequence of five panels that transitions aspect-to-aspect to take the reader from a street view of a house to Elizabeth and Rae talking alone on a bed to a two-panel passionate kiss. The scene may be chronological within the narrative or flashback; either way the kiss mainly serves to add an additional layer of depth and feeling to the central relationship rather than operate as

a key event within a romance narrative. Walden's graphic text is not centrally concerned with the building of a love story, but with communicating the feelings of heartbreak associated with the loss of love. Walden creates a tension between the joy found in the young, intimate relationship and the magnitude of shifting the perception of a person's understanding of their sexual identity. At the climax of the narrative, Rae tells Elizabeth she 'can't do this anymore' (21) because she is 'not...like [Elizabeth]' (23). The dialogue implies that Rae cannot continue her romantic relationship with Elizabeth because she does not believe herself to be a lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise non-heteronormative. Rae makes this announcement as she cries, her arms crumpled in front of her face, clutching the headphones that the two girls intimately share in previous scenes. The pronouncement is painful and carries a weight of finality. Whereas many of the YA novels discussed throughout the thesis feature a break-up of the central romantic relationship at similarly critical moments within the narrative, those relationships—now, by and large—are reconciled by the resolution of the YA novel; Elizabeth and Rae's relationship does not. The remainder of the story is constructed through a series of moments that may be the present or may be flashback scenes that communicate the mutuality of Elizabeth and Rae's despair at the limitations of their failed romantic relationship. While Walden's graphic text does not reproduce the happy ending of majority of the YA texts examined in this thesis, *I Love This Part* does not reproduce a *hopeless* ending either. Like *Honor Girl*, this graphic text focuses on a very specific period of time and on a singular relationship during an early stage of sexual identity formation. This focus leaves space for the reader to interact with the text, inserting her own experience to presume that while this may have been a key relationship in the cartoonist's biography, it was not and will not be the only relationship. While Walden encourages the reader to feel the depth of the emotion, the

narrative does not stagnate in despair: the graphic text resolves with a reconciliation of the friendship, even if the romantic relationship is no longer possible.

*I Love This Part* is a very different in style and form from *High School Chronicles* and *Honor Girl* as it is a shorter graphic text (sixty four pages) comprised of full-page illustrations within a single panel, bordered panels or bleeds. Walden rejects the more traditional layout of multiple panels per page, as employed by all of the other comics referenced throughout this chapter, wherein time and space are typically fractured in what McCloud calls a ‘jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments’ (*Understanding Comics* 67) aided by the reader’s interpretation of the closure. The meaning of the closure can depend on what category of panel-to-panel transitions is being used in each particular text. The categories include: moment-to-moment; action-to-action; subject-to-subject; scene-to-scene, which may transport readers ‘across significant distances of time and space’ (71); aspect-to-aspect, a ‘wandering eye’ (71); and non-sequitur. With fewer moments of closure, and larger gaps in time and information between the panel transitions from scene-to-scene, or occasionally action-to-action, *I Love This Part* is slowed, to continue the musical metaphor, to a *lento* rhythm. Walden requires her reader to tie these disparate whole notes together into some sense of a ‘continuous, unified’ melody (67). The rhythm of Walden’s graphic text is decelerated further with the use of silent panels, which ‘offer no clues to [their] duration’ (102). Nearly half of the panels of the graphic text are silent panels, or panels that include only a symbol of a sound: a single eighth note encased in a speech bubble. As the eighth note is just an icon, intended to stand in for a portion of an unnamed song (or songs, from a playlist Rae emails Elizabeth toward the end of the graphic text), what those individual notes sound like, in comparison with silence, is left solely up to the reader’s imagination. In most instances, a border provides closure for these silent panels, but Walden also relies on bleeds to further isolate particular moments from the



Figure 15: From *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden

rhythms of time. The emotional impressions of Walden's bleed illustrations linger from page-to-page as the reader constructs the intimate love story between Elizabeth and Rae with very little information. Walden relies more heavily than Schrag and Thrash on her reader to be a 'silent accomplice' in telling her story (68), requiring the reader to insert their own feelings and experiences of the intersection between love and

The composition of the illustrations work towards the similar goal of reproducing the feelings of timelessness as well as the magnitude of Elizabeth and Rae's feelings for one another. As referenced briefly in the introduction to this graphic text, Walden's illustrations repeatedly juxtapose the two girls as colossal figures within various natural landscapes or architectural structures. For example, in the opening illustration Elizabeth and Rae listen to music together as they lie in a mountain valley as if it were a hammock: the hillside is their pillow and the forest of evergreen trees only reaches to half the height of Rae's upper arm. In another illustration, the girls sit like giants between two bungalows and share a can of soda, their faces obscured by the naked tree branches closer in the foreground. In a silent panel, the two girls gently embrace on the roof of an industrial building under a clear night's sky, their torsos the height of the adjacent silos. The illustrations are romantic in their evocation of the sublime. In the final image of the two girls together, Walden repeats the title of the

graphic text in Elizabeth's speech balloon: 'I love this part' (Thrash 48) (See fig. 6).

The landscape is composed of a black road curving through vegetation with a mountain range silhouetted against a stormy sky; Elizabeth and Rae sit across the foreground, four times the height of the mountains, as they share a pair of earphones and focus their attention on the iPod in Elizabeth's hand. Superficially, Elizabeth's comment is directed towards the 'part' of the music video they are watching. Implicitly, Walden's metacommentary focuses the reader's attention on the feeling associated with this 'part' of the love story: the inconsequential yet intimate moments between two individuals early in a romantic relationship. This particular illustrated landscape is repeated three times in quick succession, with and without the girls and the dialogue, so that the feeling of this moment within the panel lingers with the reader until the end of the narrative. As these flashback panels are interspersed with text messages from Rae who is breaking-up with Elizabeth, Walden encourages the reader to retain the feeling of 'this part' rather than dwell in the sadness or despair of a relationship ending. As the 'love' in the title is present tense, Walden reaffirms the forward-looking interpretation of her graphic text: this is not the only time Elizabeth will 'love this part' and she will be able to look back on this moment fondly. Walden's intention with the graphic text is to make valid the feelings Elizabeth and Rae experience, not just in regard to their same-sex desires but their emotional lives as well.

## **Conclusion**

*The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag, Honor Girl, and I Love This Part* each recount a specific period of time in the cartoonists' young adult lives when their identities, particularly their sexual identities, were in the 'process of becoming' (Bauer 226). Rather than neatly deliver a 'happy ending', Schrag, Thrash, and Walden offer

instead their complicated, real-life experiences of first loves and coming out as examples of what is possible to their readers. Like Bechdel's *DTWOF* series, the comics discussed in this chapter work 'to name the unnamed, to depict the undepicted' (Bechdel *EDTWOF* xvii) in terms of non-heteronormative identities and young adult same-sex relationships as well as validate the feelings experienced by both cartoonist and the reader. As graphic memoirs set in the South in the 2000s, *Honor Girl* and *I Love This Part* centre the politically 'unspeakable' subject of homosexuality, challenging the cultural narratives of their familiar spaces. Schrag's introduction to 'dykedom' may have been smoother and more welcomed in Berkeley, California, in the 1990s but, as a young adult creator, she demonstrated to other lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists that the 'trials and tribulations' of their adolescent lives were stories worthy of depiction, too (Schrag *Awkward* 2). To paraphrase McCloud, the makers of these graphic memoirs *matter*: the representations of these personal narratives are politically important to the individual historical, political, and cultural contexts within the US. By analysing Schrag, Thrash, and Walden's graphic memoirs together, I aimed to '[lend] them a shared framework' through their collective depiction of their female same-sex relationships, 'one that challenges the heteronormative terms by which contemporary societies seek to elide, "forget," or deny queer everyday existence and non-normative lives' (Bauer 227). This intention is important because the cartoonists trust the reader, their 'silent accomplice' (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 68), to fill in the gaps of their personal narratives, from the chronological events of a school year to the timelessness of non-sequitur moments with a beloved, by bringing their own emotional lives to the interpretation of the graphic texts. The graphic memoirs engage the reader emotionally but, as distinct from fictional YA novels explored in the previous four chapters, they also offer *real-life* examples of 'ways of being and behaving' (Betz 15).



## **Conclusion**

### **Reflections on Lesbian Love Stories in Young Adult Literature**

Throughout this thesis I have surveyed and interrogated the constructions of lesbian and female bisexual protagonists and their romantic same-sex relationships in young adult (YA) novels and graphic texts in order to understand how love and sexuality function at the core of these narratives. One of the significant outputs of this research has been to assemble a corpus of nearly one hundred texts wherein the non-heteronormative female characters are the centres of their own love stories. By prioritising these texts, I have brought critical attention to (and sometimes championed) lesbian and bisexual YA novels and graphic texts that have been previously undervalued or overlooked in the scholarly study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) children's and YA literature. My focused examination of the ways in which lesbian love stories, specifically, are told for a young adult audience has also highlighted these narratives as worthy of consideration alongside the previous investigations of the representations of LGBTQ identities in YA literature in general. My investigation into the role of romantic love in these narratives has required me to engage with how genres impact the construction of characters and narratives, influence the worlds those figures inhabit, and allow for different types of narrative communication with the implied (young adult) readership.

A major finding of my research has been the identification of the ways in which lesbian love stories have enabled the evolution in LGBTQ YA literature: from portraying homosexuality as 'an issue' to be resolved in the narrative to exploring the protagonist's identity and sexuality through the experience of an intimate, same-sex relationship. Since 1976, the progress of YA literature depicting lesbian and female bisexual characters and their same-sex relationships has shifted remarkably throughout

each decade. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, though, the overwhelming majority of lesbian love stories for a young adult audience have been positive portrayals of homosexuality and romantic relationships, wherein the protagonist and her love interest have survived, thrived, and been allowed ‘happy endings’. Such optimistic stories were necessary in response to the YA novels of the twentieth century that treated their same-sex desires as a passing phase, relegated lesbians to secondary roles in the narratives, or dismissed female bisexual characters altogether. Part of the evolution of these narratives is that, while the love story often dominates the YA novels explored in this thesis, the protagonist’s sexuality is just one aspect of her identity. Reese in Julie Anne Peter’s *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) is a swimmer, an early years caretaker, and an artist. In Malinda Lo’s *Huntress* (2011), Taisin is fulfilling her life-long goal of training to become a sage and Kaede is the first huntress in the human world. Jesse in *The Difference Between You and Me* (2012) by Madeleine George is an activist and graphic designer who likes to wear fisherman boots. The summer that Maggie Thrash experiences her first same-sex crush on her camp counsellor in her graphic memoir *Honor Girl* (2015), she also receives her Distinguished Expert certificate in rifle shooting. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, then, telling love stories has provided an avenue for new multi-faceted characters to emerge on the page for a young adult audience. Viewed in this way, I argue that the ‘happy ending’ of the lesbian love story has been a gift to the twenty-first century young adult reader in much the same way that the ‘unhappy ending’ was a gift for the 1950s lesbian pulp reader.

Through part of my interrogation of the narrative construction of lesbian love stories in YA literature, I have developed a critical approach to examining the lesbian YA romance novel. I argue that it participates in and draws on generic conventions from three areas of romance studies—popular romance, young adult romance, and lesbian romance—reproducing as well as diverging from established romance narratives. This

is reflected in my definition of the subgenre—a *young adult novel that tells the story of the development and resolution of a romantic relationship between the female protagonist and her female love interest(s)*—and in the establishment of the main actors, settings, timeframes, and key narrative elements. For example, the key narrative element of the *revelation (coming out)* is based on generic conventions from both popular romance and lesbian romance. In principle, the event of the revelation, where the protagonist reveals her romantic feelings for the love interest (or vice versa), pivots on the idea of Pamela Regis' narrative element of the *declaration* (Regis 34), in which the hero or heroine declares their love (see Appendix 4). More often though, the revelation in the lesbian YA romance novel is the exposure of previously unknown same-sex desires, resulting in the protagonist and/or love interest coming out as lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise non-heteronormative. This coming out storyline mirrors a typical plot point that, Phyllis M. Betz argues, is essential to the lesbian romance narrative. However, I argue that the execution and development of the key narrative element of the *first kiss* is unique to the lesbian YA romance novel, distinct from the generic conventions of the romance genres explored in Chapter One. As I have demonstrated through my analysis in the five central chapters of the thesis, the first kiss is particular to this set of novels for two reasons. First, due to the age of the characters, the moment of physical intimacy may be *the* first same-sex kiss for the character, rather than simply a first kiss that establishes a narrative relationship or (re)union. Second, because the experience is most often new to the character, the first kiss has the immediate effect of calling into question, or confirming, the character's sexual identity. This combination of characteristics is not found in any of the essential elements of the three romance genres in which my corpus of novels participate, although it would be interesting to apply this narrative model to gay (male) romance YA novels to identify if a similar narrative event occurs.

My research has sought to examine what ideologies are being communicated to the implied reader through the portrayals of lesbian and bisexual protagonists and their romantic relationships in young adult novels and graphic texts. Through close reading of the texts, and the additional consideration of peritextual information related to the works, the overall message communicated in the majority of these narratives is altruistic in intention. Some of the YA novels, such as *Sister Mischief* (2011) by Laura Goode, *Everything Leads to You* (2014) by Nina LaCour, and *Ask the Passengers* (2012) by A.S. King, even demonstrate *agape* for their implied readers, a love ‘based on human solidarity’ (Krznaric 9). As I have demonstrated in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, authors like Julie Anne Peters and Malinda Lo have been explicit in their communication with their readers, and general audience, outside of the text regarding their intention to write stories about lesbian, bisexual, or queer characters. Part of this objective, for Peters and Lo, is to increase the diversity of narratives available to young adult readers. Even when the author has not spoken publically about their motivations for connecting with their readership, those same intentions are evident in the YA narratives across my research corpus through the repeated depiction of the confirmation and acceptance of non-heteronormative identities, the support and hope offered to the protagonist and her love interest (individually or as a couple), and the diverse depictions of lesbian and bisexual characters who offer the reader myriad ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15). These *agape*-fuelled principles are most apparent in the more recent YA novels of the 2010s, another indication of the ways in which LGBTQ YA narratives have become increasingly inclusive in the twenty-first century.

As for all types of love, the repeated refrain of this research project can be condensed into one question: how does love operate in lesbian love stories for a young adult audience? The primary answer, which may at first appear obvious, is that romantic love dominates the narratives of my research corpus. The passion of *eros* and the

playfulness of *ludus* are exhibited, singularly or collectively, in every text. The latter is particularly interesting to note because it is not always associated with the general concept of the dramatic love story, which author Jeffrey Eugenides argues ‘nearly without exception, give[s] love a bad name’ (xiii). Some of the lesbian love stories that I have examined throughout this thesis, though, give love a playful name, even a joyous name. For example, the central romantic couple of Molly Beth Griffin’s *Silhouette of a Sparrow* (2012) display *ludus* in their delight in each other, the lakeside amusements, and the dance hall of the 1920s during their summer fling. Even when the romantic relationship ends, as it does in *I Love This Part* (2015) by Tillie Walden, first love stories can be based more in *ludus* than *eros* in literature about teenage experiences. As examined in Chapter Four in the close reading of Cameron’s first kiss scene with Irene in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth, this reliance on *ludus* as a form of love can also impact the language used to describe the same-sex desires between the young female characters, resulting in often sweet or innocent descriptions of physical intimacies that skirt the erotic experience. The age of the protagonists, largely still dependent on parents or guardians and in secondary education, also determines a predominance of the depiction of familial and friendly love (*philia*) in lesbian love stories. These loving relationships sometimes pose conflicts in the narrative, especially when the friend or parent objects to homosexuality or bisexuality, but they can also serve as models for loving relationships, or how to walk away from relationships that were once loving; this is another small way in which these narratives sometimes offer different ‘ways of being and behaving’ (Betz 15).

My research has found that genre, like the ‘wanderings’ (Sorenson 7) discussed in Chapter Four, can expand the range of what is possible for the representation of lesbian and bisexual characters in YA literature and graphic texts. Conventions of the romance genre were instrumental in moving these narratives beyond the ‘issues’ of

sexuality and in placing lesbian and bisexual characters at the centre of those narratives as protagonists. *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden set the precedent for the lesbian love story between the protagonist and her love interest by replicating elements of the romance genre. Peters replicated a similar narrative structure to provide additional lesbian love stories for readers in the 2000s. When generic conventions from romance and another genre or genres are combined, the narrative results can include an expanded picture of the possibilities for gender, sexuality, and relationships. Examined in Chapter Three, Lo's fantasy and science fiction novels depict adventure-filled love stories in worlds that allow for the inclusion of a wider diversity of gender, sexuality, race, and relationships structures. Magical realism accounts for the appearance of the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates as an imaginary friend for protagonist Astrid in King's *Ask the Passengers*, which directly facilitates discussions of his philosophical teaching within the text and witnessed by the reader. The graphic memoir has enabled lesbian, bisexual, and queer cartoonists to use generic codes and conventions regarding time and space in which to concurrently relate to the reader the meta and the minutiae of their experiences of falling in love for the first time. There is space in the study of YA literature for further genre-led research in each area examined through my thesis (as well as extended into other genres, such as crime, horror, and mystery), and it is my hope that this field continues to grow.

Another area in need of further attention, both in literature and in research, is the discussion and portrayal of bisexual characters in YA novels and graphic texts. The inclusion of female bisexual characters in LGBTQ YA literature did not appear until the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the publication of *Empress of the World* (2001) by Sara Ryan. Since that time, the rise in the number of female bisexual protagonists has been much slower than the increase in lesbian protagonists. Due to the limited availability of YA novels portraying bisexual protagonists and their romantic

relationships during the period of my research, there was not enough material for me to conclusively identify narrative patterns that were discrete to love stories in bisexual YA novels; the YA novels with female bisexual protagonists tend to replicate a similar narrative structure to the YA novels with lesbian protagonists, from Ryan's *Empress of the World* to Lo's *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013). As more bisexual YA novels are published, future research could apply the methodology of the key narrative elements of the lesbian YA romance novel to the examination of female bisexual protagonists and their romantic relationships. Looking ahead, it appears hopeful that the underrepresentation of bisexual characters may soon change with the publication of at least five YA novels with female bisexual protagonists in 2017 alone: *The Cursed Queen* (2017) by Sarah Fine, *Our Own Private Universe* (2017) by Robin Talley, *Island of Exiles* (2017) by Erica Cameron, *It's Not Like It's a Secret* (2017) by Misa Sugiura, and *Ramona Blue* (2017) by Julie Murphy. The remaining years of the 2010s will tell if this surge of new YA novels is a bumper year for female bisexual characters or the start of an upward trend. There is also a need, in general, for more multi-dimensional, intersectional lesbian, bisexual, and queer characters in YA literature in a breadth of genres; the library and bookshop shelves are dominated by white cisgender lesbian characters and they do not reflect the totality of the actual, diverse readership. I remain hopeful, though, that the field of LGBTQ YA literature will continue to expand in unconventional directions and explore its limitless possibilities.

The fundamental conclusion of this thesis is that love stories are important. While the satisfaction of a happy endings may, for some readers, lie in seeing the girl get the girl at the end of a lesbian love story, these narratives also present opportunities to see the love and desires that we, the implied readers, experience in our lives. The fact remains that, even in the twenty-first century, the depictions of same-sex relationships, collectively and individually, still present a challenge, Heike Bauer argues, to 'the

heteronormative terms by which contemporary societies seek to elide, “forget,” or deny queer everyday existence and non-normative lives’ (227). As long as books about lesbian and bisexual characters, for audiences of any age, retain the potential to be banned from library bookshelves, such challenges remain relevant (ALA ‘2015-2016’). Author Ali Smith contends that ‘we live by telling ourselves stories’ and ‘if we’re careful, the stories will see us through, like boats’ on the sea, whatever the weather (*Desert Island Discs*). Equally, biomedical researchers Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon claim that ‘[l]ove makes us who we are, and who we can become’ (viii). If stories are ‘incredibly powerful’ (Smith *Desert Island Discs*) and love is one of the ‘opalescent pigments that gild our lives with vibrancy and meaning’ (Lewis et al. 36), then love stories play a central role in who we believe ourselves to be, and are, therefore, worthy of our study and attention.



## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Lesbian Young Adult Romance Novels

Year	Author	Title
1982	Nancy Garden	<i>Annie on My Mind</i>
1994	M.E. Kerr	<i>Deliver Us from Evie*</i>
1996	Nancy Garden	<i>Good Moon Rising</i>
1999	Paula Boock	<i>Dare Truth or Promise</i>
2001	Sara Ryan	<i>Empress of the World</i>
2003	Tea Bunduhn	<i>Gravel Queen</i>
	Lauren Myracle	<i>Kissing Kate</i>
	Julie Anne Peters	<i>Keeping You a Secret</i>
2004	Maureen Johnson	<i>The Bermudez Triangle (On the Count of Three)</i>
	Lisa Jahn-Clough	<i>Country Girl, City Girl</i>
2006	Beth Goobie	<i>Gravel Queen</i>
2007	Sara Ryan	<i>Rules for Hearts</i>
2008	Mayra Lazara Dole	<i>Down to the Bone</i>
	Leanne Lieberman	<i>Gravity</i>
	Ellen Wittlinger	<i>Love &amp; Lies: Marisol's Story</i>
2009	Jane Eagland	<i>Wildthorn<sup>†</sup></i>
	Malinda Lo	<i>Ash<sup>°</sup></i>
2010	Emily Horner	<i>A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend</i>
	Joanne Horniman	<i>About a Girl</i>
2011	Kate Constable	<i>Always Mackenzie</i>
	Laura Goode	<i>Sister Mischief</i>
	Malinda Lo	<i>Huntress<sup>°</sup></i>
	K.E. Payne	<i>365 Days</i>
	Julie Anne Peters	<i>She Loves You, She Loves You Not...</i>
	Alex Sanchez	<i>Boyfriends with Girlfriends</i>
2012	Marisa Calin	<i>Between You &amp; Me</i>
	E. Franklin & B. Halpin	<i>Tessa Masterson Will Go to Prom</i>
	Molly Beth Griffin	<i>Silhouette of a Sparrow<sup>†</sup></i>

	Malinda Lo	<i>Adaptation</i> <sup>°</sup>
<b>2013</b>	Sara Farizan	<i>If You Could Be Mine</i>
	Malinda Lo	<i>Inheritance</i> <sup>°</sup>
<b>2014</b>	Sara Farizan	<i>Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel</i>
	Nina LaCour	<i>Everything Leads to You</i>
	Julie Anne Peters	<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>
	Robin Talley	<i>Lies We Tell Ourselves</i> <sup>†</sup>
<b>2015</b>	Liz Kessler	<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>
	Abbi Rushton	<i>Unspeakable</i>
<b>2016</b>	Jaye Robin Brown	<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>
	Audrey Coulthurst	<i>Of Fire and Stars</i> <sup>°</sup>

Table 1: A list of the lesbian young adult romance novels from my research corpus. The \* indicates a secondary character, the † indicates a historical YA romance novel, and the ° indicates a work of fantasy or science fiction YA romance novel.

## Appendix 2

### Young Adult Novels with Female Bisexual Protagonists and Love Interests

Year	Author	Title
<b>2001</b>	Sara Ryan	<i>Empress of the World</i>
<b>2004</b>	Maureen Johnson	<i>The Bermudez Triangle</i>
<b>2008</b>	Joanne Horniman	<i>About a Girl</i> *
<b>2011</b>	Laura Goode	<i>Sister Mischief</i> *
	Alex Sanchez	<i>Boyfriends with Girlfriends</i>
<b>2012</b>	Malinda Lo	<i>Adaptation</i>
<b>2013</b>	Malinda Lo	<i>Inheritance</i>
<b>2014</b>	Tess Sharpe	<i>Far From You</i>
<b>2015</b>	Hannah Moskowitz	<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>
<b>2016</b>	C.B. Lee	<i>Not Your Sidekick</i>

Table 2: Young Adult Novels with Female Bisexual Protagonists and Love Interests. The \* indicates a secondary character.

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Janice Radway's Narrative Structure for the 'Ideal' Romance Novel**

A summary of the narrative structure for the 'ideal' romance based on a survey of the Smithton readers' reading preferences.

1. 'The heroine's social identity is destroyed.
2. The heroine reacts antagonistically to an aristocratic male.
3. The aristocratic male responds ambiguously to the heroine.
4. The heroine interprets the hero's behavior as evidence of a purely sexual interest in her.
5. The heroine responds to the hero's behavior with anger or coldness.
6. The hero retaliates by punishing the heroine.
7. The heroine and hero are physically and/or emotionally separated.
8. The hero treats the heroine tenderly.
9. The heroine reinterprets the hero's ambiguous behavior as the product of previous hurt.
10. The hero proposes/openly declares his love for/demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the heroine with a supreme act of tenderness.
11. The heroine responds sexually and emotionally.
12. The heroine's identity is restored' (Radway 134).

## Appendix 4

### Pamela Regis' Narrative Structure for the Romance Novel

A summary of each of Regis' eight essential elements and three accidental elements for the romance novel as outlined in her expanded definition.

#### *Eight Essential Elements of the Romance Novel*

- *Society Defined*: 'Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt' (31).
- *The Meeting*: 'Usually near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes present in flashback, the heroine and hero meet for the first time. Some hint of conflict to come is often introduced' (31-32).
- *The Barrier*: 'A series of scenes often scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. The romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and hero' (32).
- *The Attraction*: 'A scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry. The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier' (33-34).
- *The Declaration*: 'The scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero, can occur anywhere in the narrative' (34).
- *Point of Ritual Death*: 'The point of ritual death marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more

substantial than ever. The happy ending is most in jeopardy at this point' (35-36).

- *The Recognition*: 'In a scene or scenes the author represents the new information that will overcome the barrier. [...] In romance novels, the heroine is at the centre of the recognition scene, where any number of things can be "recognized" [e.g. external or internal barriers are removed or disregarded]' (36-37).
- *The Betrothal*: 'In a scene or scenes the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts. In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together' (37-38).

*Three Accidental Elements Characteristic of the Romance Novel (38-39)*

- *Wedding, Dance, or Fete*: 'In a scene or scenes the promised wedding is depicted, or some other celebration of the new community is staged, such as a dance or a fete. The emphasis here is on inclusion, and this scene is promised in every romance, even if it is not dramatized' (38).
- *Scapegoat Exiled*: 'In a scene or scenes a representative of wrongheadedness in the romance novel, a character who wittingly or not, prevents the heroine and hero from marrying, is ejected from the new society formed by their union' (39).
- *The Bad Converted*: 'In a scene or scenes, we see one or more opponents of the marriage converted to an acceptance of it and incorporated into the society formed by the union at the end of the novel' (39).

## Appendix 5

### Published Works by Julie Anne Peters, 1999-2014

<i>Define Normal</i> (1999)	YA
<i>Keeping You a Secret</i> (2003)	YA
<i>Luna</i> (2004)	YA
<i>Far From Xanadu</i> (2005)/ <i>Pretend You Love Me</i> (2011)	YA
<i>Between Mom &amp; Jo</i> (2006)	YA
<i>Grl2Grl: short fictions</i> (2007)	YA
<i>Rage: A Love Story</i> (2009)	YA
<i>Revenge of the Snob Squad</i> (2009)	MG
<i>By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead</i> (2010)	YA
<i>Romance of the Snob Squad</i> (2010)	MG
<i>A Snitch in the Snob Squad</i> (2010)	MG
<i>B.J.'s Billion Dollar Bet</i> (2011)	CB
<i>Love Me, Love My Broccoli</i> (2011)	MG
<i>Grl2Grl 2: short fictions</i> (2011)	YA
<i>Risky Friends</i> (2011)	MG
<i>She Loves You, She Loves You Not...</i> (2011)	YA
<i>The Stinky Sneakers Contest</i> (2011)	CB
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)</i> (2012)	YA
<i>How Do You Spell Geek?</i> (2013)	MG
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i> (2014)	YA

Table 3: Young Adult, Middle Grade, Chapter Books, and Short Story Collections by Julie Anne Peters.

## **Appendix 6**

### **Email communication from Tillie Walden, cartoonist, to Erica Gillingham.**

From: Tillie Walden

7 January 2017, 14:27

To: Erica Gillingham

Re: A question about I Love This Part

Hi Erica!

Yes, ILTP is somewhat autobiographical. Everything up until the very end is pretty much true, though the relationship it's based on ended slightly differently. Obviously the way I do the backgrounds is magical realism but the girls' personalities and conversations are true. The book really works in either the category of memoir or fiction. It has a lot of truth to it but the way it's told could let it live on entirely as fiction. This book doesn't perfectly fit either category haha! Hope that helps some!

Best,

Tillie

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